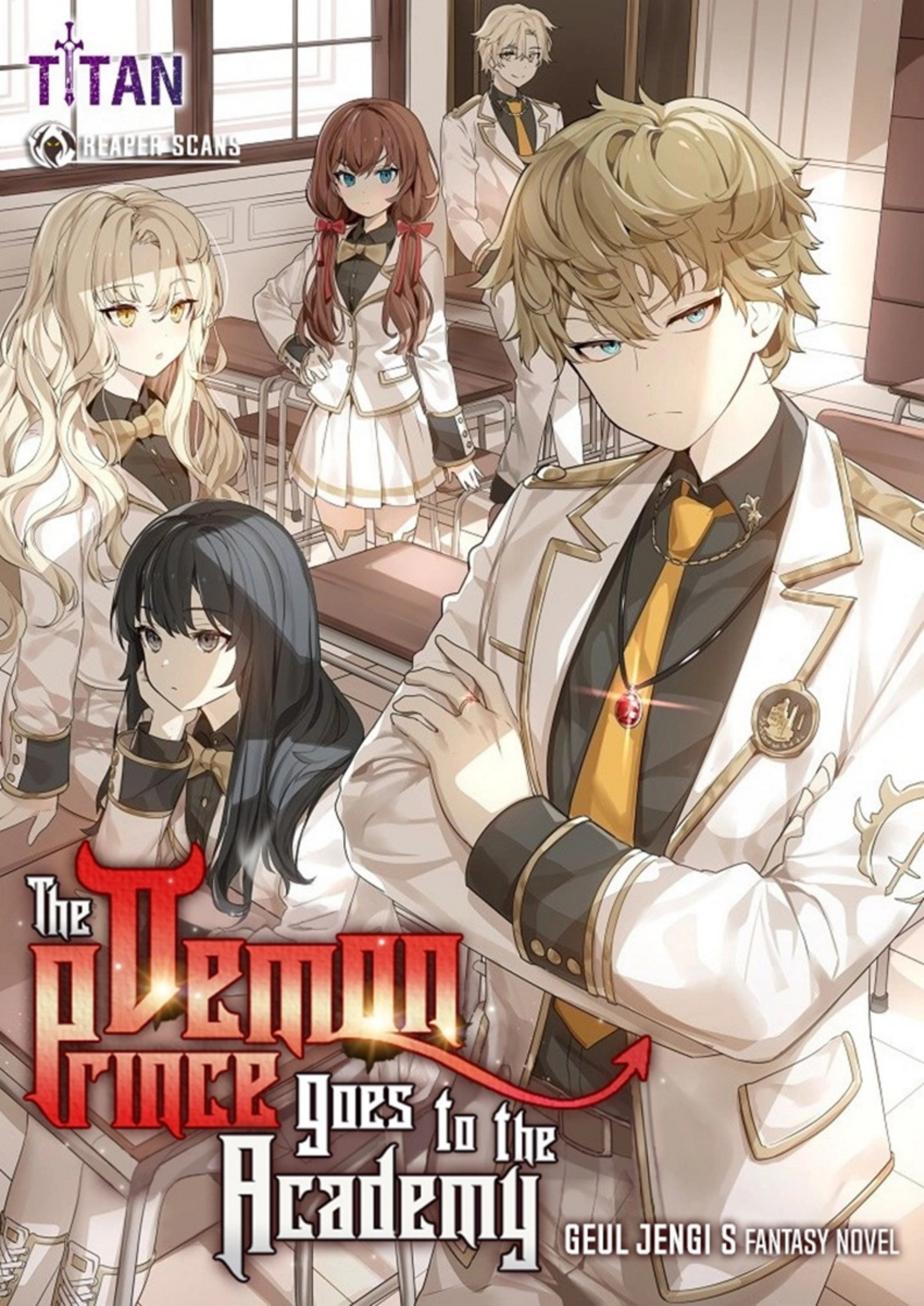

TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

–마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 6 -

-AUTHOR-

Geul Jengi S

-ILLUSTRATOR-

RONOPU

[REAPER SCANS | SUBUDAI11]

CHAPTER 251

They decided to shut the Orbis class down, but the procedure took time, of course.

The students who submitted their withdrawal from the facility as a form of collective action seemed to have been expelled from Temple for disgracing the school, however, those that refrained from such actions would remain in Temple and get reassigned to other schools.

As far as I knew, the first-years were living in the general headquarters after they were summoned there to protect them from the seniors' retaliation.

Both seniors and juniors were under investigation, so the seniors would be living in the Orbis Class dormitory.

If Oscar had actually submitted his withdrawal, I wondered if I had to go to Emperatos, the Imperial Castle, to meet him. Putting aside whether I could or couldn't go there, I was pretty sure that Oscar hadn't dropped out.

…And that he wouldn't get punished, either.

Seeing the way he did things, I didn't think that he had actually ever laid a hand on his juniors directly.

There was no way that he, who was careful to indirectly bully his juniors and express his insults in a roundabout way, would participate in something like collective actions to openly antagonize someone. Even if he was a distant member of the Imperial family, he wouldn't do something like that.

I left the Royal Class dormitory as if I was conducting a covert operation.

If I was going to do something alone, I was sure there would be a lot of people who would want to stop me.

However, shouldn't I clean up the shit I caused myself?

Furthermore, I wasn't actually going alone.

I moved while keeping an eye on Sarkegaar in the form of a sparrow, who flew around, following me while adapting to my speed, sitting on branches and watching me.

If things seemed to get serious, Sarkegaar would swoop in. I didn't really know what kind of excuse I would give him if that happened, but he was my insurance.

Either way, it would be far better than dying.

If Oscar killed me in the middle of Temple, his head would go flying as well, so he probably wouldn't try that anyway.

I only ever visited the Orbis Class once, but it was going to shut down.

At that point, wasn't I like a monster that brought disaster wherever it went? Well, I mean, as I was the demon prince, that should've been about right.

In the end, none of the Orbis Class students would look upon me favorably.

Was it even okay to show up there? Oscar wasn't the only problem. I could get stabbed by someone else, right?

I should keep my guard up for now.

* * *

The Orbis Class dormitory was designated as a controlled area. The Royal Class dormitory was a place not everyone could get into, and the same rang true for the Orbis Class as well.

However, since it had turned into a controlled area, guards were deployed at every entrance 24/7. Of course, I couldn't get in like that.

I could see some people leaving the dormitory with suitcases from time to time.

They must have been the seniors who had submitted their withdrawals and were told to leave Temple due to those actions.

None of them looked very happy.

However, oddly enough, I couldn't call those expressions simply unhappy.

Rather than feeling bad about it, should I say that they seemed as if they were prepared for something?

The expressions on the Orbis Class seniors' faces, which seemed incredibly hardened, somehow felt a little strange to me.

Sarkegaar watched over me from nearby in the form of a sparrow.

"This is currently a controlled area."

The guard at the entrance told me to stand back and pointed to the inside of the dorm.

"I have no intention of going in, I just want to meet someone. I have something to tell them."

Fortunately, the guard wasn't unresponsive and asked me who I was there to meet.

When I told him I wanted to see Oscar de Gardias, he simply nodded and sent another guard to enter the dorm.

How long is it going to take?

I saw a blonde, young man walking down the hall, approaching the entrance.

"…What business do you have with me?"

As I thought, that guy didn't drop out.

* * *

Oscar de Gardias seemed surprised rather than angered that I went to visit him. Was he not actually related to the assassination attempt?

When I asked him to talk with me, that guy and I sat down on a bench in a secluded place near the dormitory because completely going out was forbidden. Sarkegaar sat on a branch close by and kept watch.

He was just a cute little sparrow right then, but if he got angry, he would turn into a dragon.

How reliable.

Contrary to my concerns, Oscar didn't seem to be hostile towards me. However, I couldn't be careless around him—he was a narrow-eyed character, after all.

"Isn't it quite funny? You only fought once, but as a result, the Orbis Class, which boasts a long history, ended up getting shut down."

"…It's not funny."

"Really? I find it quite funny."

Oscar simply laughed. I didn't know what he was thinking on the inside, but he seemed to be having quite some fun on the surface.

That guy's attitude during the disciplinary committee meeting was also a bit weird.

He didn't try to defend himself, he didn't try to put the blame on me, and he didn't even seem shocked when Lilka Aaron dropped that bombshell, quite contrary, he seemed to find the situation quite amusing.

Even then, he didn't seem to hold any resentment. Was he good at hiding his emotions? There shouldn't be any reason for him to personally like what was going on.

"Are you afraid of retaliation?"

Even though I didn't say anything, he knew exactly why I had gone to him.

"Honestly, yes."

"Those are useless concerns. Of course, after that incident, most Orbis Class students ended up hating you, and there are a lot of other people who also resent you, but what good would laying their hands on you do? The only fact that would remain is that they harmed the Imperial Prince and Princess's classmate."

Why was he kindly telling me those things?

I was worried about getting into a fight with that guy at first, but the more I spoke to him, the weirder and weirder I started to feel.

“Don’t think that every person in this world is as impulsive as you.”

I couldn’t deny his words; what he said was true.

Laying hands on me was too risky, so no one would attack me directly.

However, I was pretty sure that there was someone that impulsive around, though? Impulsive enough to try to stab Ellen and me and run away!

“Well… That’s how I think, and if others think the same way, they wouldn’t dare touch you. What good would touching a student of a special class do? Of course, there are some people who would be bold enough to pick some fights if they met you in person, so be careful when you meet seniors from Orbis Class while walking around on Main Street. That’s all.”

Oscar grinned and patted my cheek.

“Don’t worry and just go to your classes.”

Why did he look so happy? Why didn’t he have any resentment? That guy just stared at me before he gave me some words.

"Hmm. If there’s nothing else, you can go.”

That was all Oscar said. Just what was he thinking?

However, it was Oscar who stood up first after he told me to go.

There wasn’t even a hint of concern visible. Even after I went to see him personally, I got nothing out of it.

I felt like he was possessed by a ghost or something. If what I saw wasn’t wrong, Oscar didn’t hold any sentiments whatsoever towards me and even seemed somewhat appreciative.

Oscar turned a corner, then a sparrow landed on my shoulder.

“Something stinks.”

-Tweet!

As if to answer me, the sparrow chirped enthusiastically.

“Oscar and the Orbis Class are the same. This… This is just too weird.”

It was strange.

However, I couldn’t pinpoint what exactly was strange about it.

It was certain that there were people out to kill me because of the Orbis Class incident.

However, Oscar tried to reassure me that nothing would happen to me.

Of course, there was a good chance that he’d lied. Maybe he did something like that to try to make me drop my guard before stabbing me in the back.

To tell me that there wouldn’t be any assassination attempts against me… That was just far too risky.

That’s right.

His words had to be right.

But just what was Oscar enjoying so much?

I found his behavior exceedingly weird.

The Orbis Class’s shutdown wasn’t the problem. There seemed to be something dubious and concerning happening behind the scenes right at that moment.

Just what was that assassination attempt on me? Was it actually just a vindictive individual?

Rather than solving the problem, I felt like the problem just had become more complicated.

However, Oscar was certainly hiding something.

—I could feel that much.

“Find out what this is about.”

-Yes, Your Highness.

“O-oh, that surprised me!”

I couldn’t help but get surprised when the sparrow on my shoulder suddenly started to speak.

* * *

There is a demon called a doppelganger. Since it’s a type of demon that commonly appears in ghost stories and legends, humans also spread those stories among themselves.

Doppelgangers originally had a very small population and weren’t native to the Darklands, so they appeared more frequently in the Human Realm.

They were a type of demon who could assume another person’s form and pretend to be them.

Doppelgangers were sometimes portrayed to be either evil or simply mischievous entities.

Doppelgangers could only transform into someone else, and dreadfiends could transform their bodies freely.

As such dreadfiends were perfectly superior to doppelgangers.

Eavesdropping on others was the easiest thing in the world for Sarkegaar, who belonged to the dreadfiend clan.

While transforming into something the size of a mosquito was too much, he could change into something the size of a cockroach, and cockroaches could hide pretty much anywhere.

Sarkegaar didn't quite like changing into such small lifeforms since one would actually die if they were killed while they were transformed and such beings had low durability.

The first thing Sarkegaar specialized in was eavesdropping.

The second…

Digging up secrets.

There was always someone people confided their secrets to.

If someone disguised themselves as one of those beings and tried to elicit an answer from someone, they could easily obtain information. Of course, that was a pretty dangerous way of going about it because it created memories in the other party of meeting and talking with someone even though they didn't actually meet that person.

Sarkegaar wanted to use his first method, which was the easiest.

He was already able to infiltrate Temple, which was surrounded by multiple barriers.

As such, it was easy for him to infiltrate the Orbis Class dormitory, which only had some guards standing before the entrance.

Crevices in doors, inside closets…

There were many places for him to hide and many ways to infiltrate.

Sarkegaar entered the dormitory in the form of a bird and followed Oscar de Gardias. When he opened the door to his private room, Sarkegaar turned into a small cockroach, crawled under the door, and immediately hid in the crack between a closet and the wall.

Even if he was discovered, the only concerns that would come about were hygienic ones. No one would suspect that a cockroach would be a spy planted by someone.

There were many ways to prevent and destroy eavesdropping magics or familiars, but Sarkegaar was an actual living being.

* * *

When he turned into a cockroach, he actually turned into one. He was just a cockroach with a dreadfiend's soul and intellect.

Such was the nature of his transformation ability that was equivalent to the ultimate magic, Polymorph.

What could prevent Sarkegaar from eavesdropping in that state wasn't anti-eavesdropping magic but pesticide.

Other than the Imperial Palace, Emperatos, where security and barrier systems had been maximized after the kidnapping, there were very few places Sarkegaar couldn't get into.

One of those places was the palace Charlotte de Gardias resided in.

Fortunately, the Orbis Class dormitory, which had good hygiene, had no insect problems, so it was unlikely that they applied pesticides everywhere.

There was no reason to worry.

So Sarkegaar stayed still in Oscar de Gardias's private room.

All appointments he had to attend as Count Argon Ponteus had already been canceled, so he had no other plans for the near future. His Highness's needs were his top priority.

Cockroach-mode Sarkegaar climbed up the wall and looked down on Oscar's private room from the top of a closet.

It seemed that he had packed a few suitcases.

Oscar didn't drop out, so if he was assigned to a different class, he would have to pack up his things in advance to move there.

It was a room he was already ready to leave, otherwise, there was nothing special about it. It looked like everything, including books, had already been put away.

Oscar was sitting at his desk. Sarkegaar couldn't see the expression on his face

because he was looking down at him from above.

He wasn't writing anything.

However, he seemed to be thinking about something with his arms crossed.

For quite a long time…

There was no reason for him to do anything, so he just sat still.

Sarkegaar changed his position and moved to a place where he could see Oscar's face. If a cockroach moved into view, it was obvious that one would try to catch it, so he had to be careful not to get caught.

Oscar wore a smile on his face.

He seemed to just keep smiling and thinking about something the whole time.

-Knock, knock

Suddenly, someone knocked.

Oscar got up and opened the door.

"Oscar, a letter has arrived for you."

"Yes, thank you."

A staff member delivered a letter to him.

Oscar opened and read it. Sarkegaar changed his position once again, strengthened his eyesight, and read the contents of the letter from a distance with him.

[This is regarding the magic logarithm theory you inquired about last time.]

[We have reviewed the theory and it works, however, there are some prerequisites that need to be filled to publish…]

It was filled with talks about, for Sarkegaar, incomprehensible and specialized knowledge. Did he present some kind of question regarding his major or some kind

of new theory to a research institute somewhere and that was the answer?

Sarkegaar quietly read the letter's contents.

It was full of unintelligible jargon, but he realized that the content wasn't actually important.

Why would that guy make such a face when he read that letter filled to the brim with academic terminology?

It was clear that his expression didn't give off something like academic elation at the contents of the letter.

He looked almost ecstatic, so Sarkegaar was able to conclude something after looking at Oscar's reaction that didn't fit the letter.

While he didn't know the details, he was sure that it was a coded letter.

Oscar had exchanged a coded letter with someone else.

Sarkegaar noticed that he read something completely different from what the letter seemed to say on the surface.

That alone was a good harvest already.

Sarkegaar didn't look at the letter—he looked at the envelope.

[Sender - Empire's 2nd Magic Theory Research Center]

Where he had to go next was decided.

Infiltration and intelligence gathering…

Sarkegaar was more specialized in those fields than anyone else.

* * *

Sarkegaar reported to me what he had found out.

"It looks like he's exchanging encrypted messages with someone…"

“Yes, Your Highness.”

It wasn’t just an assumption, Oscar was really in an extremely good mood. Coded letters, students dropping out, the Orbis Class shutting down…

I could make several guesses from that. However, at that stage, they were only speculations, and nothing was confirmed.

Did Oscar really have nothing to do with the assassination attempt?

The idea that the assassination attempt was being undertaken by a large group became increasingly certain.

I felt like Oscar’s plans were completely unrelated to me.

I also needed to find out about that, but it was more urgent to find out who was trying to kill me.

The most likely suspects were the sponsors of the Orbis Class seniors, those in power from their side, and Oscar de Gardias. However, that guy’s attitude made me want to rule him out.

It smelled like an organization. I didn’t know what kind of organization, but they’d organized that collective boycott.

It was clear that someone had instructed the Orbis Class, but I wasn’t sure I needed to feel any concern about them.

If that was the case, then what did the Writer’s Advice try to tell me?

I took a risk and met up with Oscar, and I found out that he didn’t actually care about me, although I didn’t really get any definite information.

If that was the case, I had to go to the next level.

I could erase countless, powerful groups from my mental list.

There was one person that came to mind…

Even though the Orbis Class acted in an organized manner, they would never be a

proper organization.

If he seemed to be part of the class, it would just be a disguise.

Of the many people who would have a personal grudge against me, who would actually try to kill me?

While I wasn't sure if he was behind it before, I knew that he would dirt his hands later on, which was how I figured out his identity.

He was one of the characters I wrote about, but he was just a one-off villain, so I'd forgotten his name. I only remembered again after I looked through the teacher list.

"One of Temple's teachers, Aaron Medera."

"Yes."

One of Temple's alchemy teachers and an active alchemist…

That guy didn't actually belong to the Orbis Class.

"Try digging up information on him. Report everything you find ASAP."

He was the one who used black magic to strengthen Ender Wilton.

"Yes, Your Highness."

He was a black magician who actually belonged to the magic society called the Black Order.

He should have been incredibly angry that his laboratory, the Orbis Class, was being shut down.

There was still a chance that it wasn't him.

If he wasn't, then I could just move on to the next suspect.

I had Sarkegaar, after all.

Sarkegaar didn't even ask how I was able to point that person out.

He just did what I told him.

What a loyal retainer.

That felt good…

* * *

That night…

Inside Imperial Palace Emperatos…

Spring palace, the Princess's bedroom…

The Imperial Family had been in a state of emergency for some time.

Very few people actually knew the details, but most could feel that the atmosphere around the Imperial Family was quite unusual.

It wasn't due to the Orbis Class situation.

Even though Temple was one of the Empire's most important businesses, in the end, it was just a business.

At the moment, the Imperial Family was suffering from internal problems.

There might've been a group of people who rejoiced at those concerns, but in the end, in the grand scheme of things, the Imperial Family couldn't afford to pay attention to external matters right then.

"Your Highness, you must go to bed now."

Charlotte smiled bitterly at Dyrus's words while sitting in her rocking chair.

"…I know that this is pointless, but I can't seem to sleep."

In addition to Dyrus, it was decided that Saviolin Turner, the leader of the 1st Imperial Knight Division, Shanapell, was to be included.

"You might feel better if you keep improving your stamina."

Even while listening to Saviolin's words, Charlotte just stayed in the rocking chair, slowly rocking her body in it.

Midnight…

There was no one in the bedroom of the Princess's Palace except those two.

Charlotte just kept on sitting in her rocking chair absent-mindedly in that empty Spring Palace.

"What about the compensation?"

"It's better if you don't worry about it…"

"The compensation…"

Charlotte looked at Saviolin Turner.

"I asked what you did about it."

"…I took measures so that they won't feel regret."

"So that they won't feel regret…"

Charlotte muttered helplessly, covering her face with her hands.

"How much money is enough so that one won't regret someone paying with their life, something that can't be exchanged for anything else? In the first place, is that something money can even buy…?"

"Your Highness…"

At Dyrus's words, Charlotte released her face from her hands.

The Princess's right eye was dyed black.

"Isn't it funny? Saying these things after I killed her."

Charlotte shook her head firmly as she spoke in a melancholic tone.

“Your Highness didn’t kill her.”

“If it wasn’t me who killed her, then who did? With my own hands, with my own ability, I killed a maidservant who worked in my palace for such a long time, so if it wasn’t me, who on earth did it?”

Next, Saviolin stepped in.

“Your Highness lost your consciousness at the time and ended up doing something bad during that moment. You can’t even remember what happened, so Your Highness can't be blamed for it. Things will get better soon.”

Despite Saviolin’s concerned and hopeful outlook, Charlotte’s expression didn’t improve.

It’ll get better…

How on earth could she believe that things would improve in that situation that only seemed to get worse?

She lost her consciousness from time to time, taken over by a different being.

“I am here on the orders of the Imperial Court in case of such emergencies, Your Highness. Nothing will happen anymore.”

Saviolin Turner stayed in the Spring Palace because of the Emperor’s orders.

Charlotte focused her mind and slowly drove away the power that had consumed her right eye.

Even that hardly worked anymore.

At Saviolin’s consolations, Charlotte looked at her.

“Dame Turner, you don’t have to tell me such lies.”

“…”

“You are here to deal with me in case it is necessary.”

“Your Highness! Something like that will never happen. Even if it would cost me my life, I will never do something like that!”

Charlotte smiled sadly when she saw Saviolin’s pale complexion.

“I’m not saying this because I’m questioning you, Dame Turner,” Charlotte murmured quietly, her eyes closed.

"I’m asking you to not hesitate when the time comes.”

“…”

"Can you promise me that you won’t hesitate?”

After a moment of silence, Saviolin Turner replied.

“I cannot promise you that. Never.”

“…”

Charlotte smiled sadly and leaned back in her rocking chair.

She’d suddenly started to sleepwalk after the group mission of the second semester ended.

When she stood barefoot in the hallway of that mansion in the middle of the night, Charlotte felt like she was dreaming.

It was not until she saw Reinhardt that she realized that she wasn’t actually dreaming but that she moved in her sleep.

Charlotte wanted to believe that she simply sleepwalked.

However, when she decided not to stay in the dormitory anymore, Charlotte was already fully aware that she wasn’t sleepwalking.

Even though she knew that she didn’t, she vaguely wanted to believe that it was the reason.

However, she knew that it wasn’t just a simple disorder.

What happened last time made her realize that the thing that was happening to her wasn't that simple.

Still, things would be fine as long as she didn't fall asleep.

She wouldn't lose control unless she fell asleep.

However, even if she decided not to sleep from then on, her body would eventually be taken over again.

Every time she thought that the end was near, someone's face passed by Charlotte's eyes.

Someone else's face started to appear as well from a certain point.

Those two…

It saddened Charlotte that she could tell neither of them about her situation.

"I'm scared of the night," Charlotte muttered helplessly.

CHAPTER 252

Someone was trying to kill Reinhardt.

Ellen still didn't believe that, however, she didn't think it was a baseless delusion, either. Reinhardt had done a lot of bad things everywhere, and it was true that he'd become the target of many grudges due to the Orbis Class incident.

Reinhardt certainly acted strange when they were out together that one time.

He'd suddenly broken out in a cold sweat and become wary of his surroundings.

Then, with him telling her not to leave his arms, they'd returned to Temple in a tense manner.

Obviously, Ellen didn't feel anything at that time. She knew that her senses were very sharp—sharp enough to sense Loyar's killing intent.

How could Reinhardt feel killing intent that she couldn't?

No matter how she thought about it, no one seemed to be after them, however, Reinhardt was convinced.

So that was why he seemed to be struggling a lot those days. She could see that he was very much on edge.

He only used moderate amounts of strength during their training, perhaps to preserve his stamina.

He had enough confidence to protect himself.

However, she wanted to help Reinhardt.

She didn't see the fact that he was already being helped enough.

Reinhardt felt like he was in danger, so she wanted to do something.

There was no such thing as an assassin, so she wanted to give him assurance and help Reinhardt turn back to normal.

However, if there was actually an assassin after him, she wanted to do something on her own.

On the weekend…

Although Ellen told Reinhardt not to do anything dangerous, she actually headed out of Temple.

It would be dangerous for Reinhardt, but if it was Ellen, that wasn't the case.

Ellen had already joined the ranks of superhumans and was able to handle some clumsy assassins, even if they came in the dozens.

There was just one thing…

She didn't know what she should do, when they would come out, and where she should even start.

She wanted to somehow relieve Reinhardt's anxiety.

She wanted to reassure him by showing him that there was no such thing as an assassin after him.

So Ellen recklessly left Temple.

She believed that there were no assassins around.

It would be better if there weren't, because that would be better for Reinhardt's nerves.

However, there she was, leaving Temple to look for them.

Without really knowing what to do, Ellen simply moved on with the conviction that there might be an assassin or a group trying to assassinate him.

There was someone out to kill Reinhardt.

While she felt a bit creeped out thinking about those things, she had to.

If she wanted to kill Reinhardt, what would she do?

There were two different settings…

Were they insiders or outsiders in regards to Temple?

For the moment, she assumed it was outside of Temple.

When he was within Temple, Reinhardt didn't behave as strangely as he did when they were outside before.

In that case, it was highly likely that the setting was outside.

She didn't feel it herself, but Reinhardt definitely felt something then. Assuming that the assassin was around at that time, why didn't they launch an attack?

Assassinations should be carried out under optimal circumstances, and that was the case back then.

Ellen was tired and Reinhardt was carrying her.

However, Reinhardt noticed.

That would mean that the assassin was a prudent person.

They were going to attempt to assassinate them in a deserted location with no witnesses around. As soon as they were surrounded by the crowd, the assassin decided not to reveal themself.

After that day, the optimal conditions for assassinating Reinhardt never came to be again because he didn't leave Temple.

Was it impossible to do in Temple?

Standing at the entrance of Temple, Ellen looked around.

"…"

If one didn't have a pass, one couldn't even go through the security checkpoint before Temple. It was a system similar to entering a mana train station but much more strict.

Convinced that there was an assassin, Ellen measured her steps.

Without hesitation, she entered Temple's access control office.

"I'm Ellen, first-year A-2 of the Royal Class."

Ellen presented her student ID. Even though she was wearing her school uniform, she didn't want to arouse any unnecessary suspicion.

"Oh, how can I help you?"

"Can a person who doesn't have a permit to enter Temple still get into Temple?"

"…?"

At that rather random question of the Royal Class student, the staff member tilted their head.

"Of course not…?"

"Are there no exceptions?"

"Why? Are you concerned about Temple's security?"

"I'm just curious."

There was no reason to answer students' questions just because they asked, but she was a Royal Class student.

The staff kindly pointed to Temple's entrance gate, seeming a little embarrassed.

"You seem to be worried that they might be able to climb over the fence or something, but that won't happen. First of all, the fence is so high that no ordinary person could jump over it easily, and there's also a barrier built over it. If someone tries to get across it recklessly, an alarm would go off, and they would get hit by a stun-type automatic defense magic, so they wouldn't be able to move until the

guards arrested them. Likewise, it's impossible for someone to enter from above because Temple's defensive barrier is dome-shaped. It's completely impossible to penetrate it from the sky. To be exact, it can detect flying objects and will take action if required."

"What about counterfeit passes?"

"Impossible. They are magic items, so each pass is unique."

"Wouldn't it be possible to use someone else's pass?"

"Uhm… I see what you're worried about."

A student suddenly went to them and asked about Temple's security.

The staff member didn't know why, but she looked incredibly serious.

"If one steals a pass and uses a disguise or camouflage magic, that would be difficult to identify, but the members of this office check everyone with Dispel as soon as they pass through the entrance gate. Their cover would be blown at that point, and don't we keep checking people coming in with this biosignal analyzer as well? Even if they disguise themselves in different ways, they would still get caught."

"Aren't there just faculty members and students in Temple?"

"Well. Not every person that comes in can be considered safe, but when we select staff who will work in Temple and people who want to open stores in Temple, we measure them to the same standards as when selecting people who aspire to work for the Imperial Family. Of course, that inevitably causes problems, but Temple puts the students' safety first in this matter."

Ellen was able to confirm that Temple had very few security holes.

However, very few still meant that there were some. While they cast Dispel on visitors to check whether they used camouflage magic, they wouldn't be able to look through physical disguises.

They could do personal identification via biosignal analyzers, but magic tools weren't perfect either. Ellen knew that if someone had a deep understanding of magic tools, they would certainly be able to disturb their workings.

One could also bribe some of the faculty members or students; there were many people in Temple that would take that money.

It wasn't impossible at all for an outside organization to assassinate Reinhardt within Temple.

In a place where far too many people gathered like Temple, it was impossible to promise absolute safety.

It wasn't that Temple's countermeasures were insufficient, it was something that couldn't be helped.

"Yes, thank you."

Ellen left the access control office after she said so.

Ellen realized that, while Temple was safer than most other places in the capital, it wasn't absolutely safe.

Ellen didn't have as much influence as her other classmates—she only had her strength and intellect.

Ellen could only think and take action.

If she assumed she was the head of an assassin organization and was asked to kill a Temple student…

If she had a chance but her target noticed, ran away, and hid themselves in Temple because he noticed someone was trying to assassinate him…

In that case, there would be two ways to go about it:

She would either have to assassinate her target within Temple or make them leave Temple.

To assassinate a student within Temple, she would need to find someone with a Temple pass, bribe them or somehow steal it from them, and then disguise herself as them to enter Temple. If they decided to do that, they would have to pass the biosignal analyzer, and, while that was difficult, it wasn't like there was no way to get through that.

Of course, just getting inside Temple wasn't the end of it. They would have to be able to infiltrate the Royal Class dormitory.

While the Royal Class dormitory didn't have its own guards, several teachers on duty resided there. It wasn't so difficult that you could call it impossible, but if a stranger suddenly popped up, everyone would be incredibly wary of them.

The Royal Class was a place where the elite of the elite gathered.

Infiltrating and trying to assassinate someone in a place where each student might have some sort of power was quite an unreasonable choice. The chances of not getting caught were really low.

Infiltrating Temple wasn't impossible, but it would be very difficult to get out safely after killing Reinhardt.

They wanted to assassinate Reinhardt without getting caught, or so it seemed.

If assassinating him within Temple was impossible, there was only one option left…

Waiting for Reinhardt to leave Temple.

"…"

If there really was an assassin, Ellen realized an obvious fact.

They were bound to closely monitor Temple's entrance.

They never knew when Reinhardt would leave, so they would have to wait to seize the opportunity.

Being patient was as easy as breathing for them.

Standing at the entrance of Temple where some faculty members and students came and went, Ellen looked around.

The assassin had to be on the lookout for Reinhardt from somewhere around there.

And if it was true that they were about to carry out an assassination attempt on them at that time…

Her appearance riding on Reinhardt's back had to have already been saved in their memories.

In that case, her own information might have already been shared among the assassins.

They had to know that she was Reinhardt's friend.

In other words…

If an assassin was lurking around here…

They would be looking at her right at that moment.

Obviously, rather than her expression or movement, Ellen had been able to read Loyar's killing intent through sheer instinct.

Like a beast born with such instincts, she was like that as well.

Hostility towards her…

Killing intent towards Reinhardt…

It was completely different from Mana Sensitivity and the like.

Ellen tried to feel who was looking at her at the moment and if there really was an assassin positioned there.

She wondered whether Reinhardt felt like that when he tried to strengthen himself with magical power.

She couldn't feel anything. She was only able to instinctively feel hostility, but she didn't know how to actively feel it.

She had no idea.

That feeling of not knowing what to do…

Right when she seemed to slightly understand how Reinhardt might feel, though putting it that way might have been a bit much…

"…"

Ellen could feel it.

The gazes directed her way…

That was the first time that Ellen was surprised by her own senses.

She couldn't believe that something like that was possible.

She didn't feel killing intent or any other emotion from the gazes; she simply felt like she was being 'watched'.

Just how much further could she go?

Why on earth was she even able to do something like that?

While Ellen was in awe of her ability, she walked in one direction, feeling that gaze on her without even having to focus on it.

She could only feel one 'gaze' on her.

Ellen walked to a different place.

She didn't feel the gaze from the main street but from a nearby cafe.

They were looking at her but also weren't.

* * *

Ellen also 'looked' at them without actually looking as she moved out of Temple's entrance.

'Reinhardt… '

As expected, when Ellen moved, her observer also moved.

'I'm sorry I didn't believe you.'

Although she was in awe of herself and feeling as if she was something other than

human…

'Still, I'll protect you at all costs.'

She was willing to do anything for Reinhardt.

No matter what she was, she would become anything for him—even if she became something beyond a monster.

That was what Ellen thought.

When she heard that Reinhardt was willing to die for her…

If she could feel that feeling of being his whole world once again…

No matter what kind of monster she turned into, she could endure everything.

—That was what Ellen believed.

Eredian district, a side alley…

She didn't have to wait long.

-Boom!

"Kuhk!"

Ellen held her breath, and when her observer followed her into the alley, she immediately attacked them from behind.

Ellen's lake-like eyes glowed calmly.

However, her actions were anything but calm.

"Kurg! Kuhuk!"

Ellen opened the mouth of her fallen stalker and kicked away the sword that was sliding on the floor to prevent him from doing anything stupid.

"Urk! Uurk! "

Ellen’s calm eyes looked down at the stalker.

“Who are you?"

“Who ordered you to do this?”

“Why did they do that?”

Ellen looked down at him, her expression ghastly.

“I’ll spare you if you tell me."

“Uuk!”

“If you understood, nod your head.”

Ellen was expressionless, but she gave off killing intent at the moment.

However, seeing the bizarre phenomenon happening before her, she couldn’t help but widen her eyes.

-Grind! Griind!

Frighteningly thick veins started to appear right in front of her on the man’s face.

-Krr! Splsh!

“!”

As the veins burst, blood splashed out.

Ellen immediately used her magical power to protect herself from the splashing blood, but things were already in motion.

“U, uuurk! A, aark! Auuuuurk!”

“What…?”

-Badump! Krr!

The veins all over the man's body suddenly swelled up, and his eyes rolled up into his head.

That person died right in front of her.

Ellen blankly stared at the corpse.

-*Push! Push!*

Then, something pushed itself out of the body's swollen veins.

'Bugs…?'

Grotesque-looking, black, earthworm-like insects wiggled themselves through the man's veins and crawled out, crumbling like dust and disappearing.

She didn't know what happened.

She couldn't understand it.

Before she knew it, the dead man's veins, which had been bulging up until then, suddenly calmed down.

Even the wounds left by the worms were completely gone. The man suddenly looked like a normal corpse.

Ellen was unable to understand the situation before her, but she could predict what would happen to her.

At that rate, she would be mistaken as the murderer.

Ellen pondered as she looked down at the body of the man before her who'd suddenly died.

Should she go find a guard? If she explained everything, there was a high possibility that she would be released after proving that she was a Temple student.

However…

That would obviously take time.

While she didn't know much about magic, she was certain it was related to it.

The body still before her, Elllen suddenly had a chilling thought.

The dead man seemed to have been manipulated by bugs of some sort…

Was that really magic?

Were Temple's security measures able to dispel that kind of magic?

Could someone controlled by that parasite get into Temple?

No, that couldn't be.

If that were the case, the people inside Temple who were controlled by the bugs would have already tried to kill Reinhardt.

Someone who manipulated people with some sort of bug was behind the assassination attempt, however, those who were controlled by them couldn't enter Temple.

It was still safe within Temple.

Ellen figured out there was an assassin, and she had found a very big clue.

She was left with a choice to make.

Was she going to call the guards and let them know about the incident? If she did that, she would have to spend countless hours trying to defend herself against the charges while explaining how the person died.

A few days…

She had to be prepared to be interrogated for at least a few days because it was a murder case.

She couldn't waste precious time like that.

Ellen looked down at the corpse.

There were no witnesses anywhere to be seen in the alley.

She hadn't killed him.

He was someone who had been manipulated, and there was a high probability that he was an innocent person.

'I'm sorry.'

She felt sorry for the injustice of it

Ellen rose up, inwardly vowing that she would definitely find out what had made him go through that, even though she couldn't take responsibility for it at that moment.

She first had to go to Reinhardt.

She had to make sure that he was safe.

Guilt was creeping up in a corner of Ellen's mind as she ran to Temple, ignoring the corpse.

* * *

"Reinhardt!"

"Huh, what?"

Reinhardt was training with Cliffman in the Royal Class dormitory's training room.

She was a bit nervous, thinking that something would have happened, but nothing happened.

"What is it? Why are you sweating like that? Where have you been?"

"Huh? Ah… No… It's nothing."

Someone actually wants to kill you.

I don't know what happened, but someone actually died on his own.

I left the body alone and ran here like crazy because I was worried about you.

Ellen stopped herself from saying that.

If she told him something like that, Reinhardt would try to do something about it on his own again. If he got her clues, he would definitely throw himself in danger again.

That was the kind of guy he was—he would always try to put himself in danger.

“Do you want to train?”

Reinhardt tried to hand her a training sword.

She would normally take him up on the offer, but not that time.

Not that day.

Reinhardt knew nothing, but he at least knew that he was in deep danger, so he wouldn’t leave Temple.

“No, I have something to do today.”

He should just stay low in that safe place, staying ignorant of the situation. Leaving the training hall, Ellen walked down the hallway.

She would definitely get to the bottom of it.

She had to find out the truth.

'I’m going to… '

She felt her mind drifting off.

‘Kill them.'

Ellen surrendered her body to her silent fury.

CHAPTER 253

Ellen didn't know much about magic other than what could be considered basic common sense.

However, she seemed certain that the human-controlling worm was a product of magic.

If they were ordinary creatures, people infested with them wouldn't be able to enter Temple.

'Magic was' the keyword.

So Ellen went to look for Harriet.

It was the weekend.

Harriet was devoted to her research in the new club called the Magic Research Society, so Ellen went to their club mansion.

Harriet was astonished when Ellen arrived, but she still followed her outside.

"What's the matter?"

Harriet was surprised that Ellen had gone to that place she had no reason to visit, but she was even more curious about what she wanted.

"Are there insects that can make humans their hosts and control them?"

"Yeah, there might be bugs like that."

"…What kinds are there?"

Harriet shook her head.

"Why are you so curious about that?"

Ellen thought about telling Harriet everything.

It would be stupid not to get help from a magic major student.

However, she couldn’t tell her anything.

If she were to tell her the truth, it would boil down to her doing something dangerous instead of Reinhardt.

Harriet would definitely try to stop her.

Even if she were to convince her, it would be the same. She couldn’t take Harriet to do such dangerous things. She could risk her own life, but she couldn't risk the lives of her friends.

“I can’t tell you the exact reason. I’m sorry, but it’s important.”

Rather than telling lame lies, Ellen preferred speaking straightforwardly like that.

“Could you please look into this for me?”

“…”

Harriet silently looked at Ellen.

An important matter…

Harriet could guess that it had to do with Reinhardt. If it didn’t have anything to do with him, why else would Ellen wear such an expression?

I don’t know what happened to Reinhardt, but he doesn’t look that good lately. Could it be because of that?

Harriet felt like Ellen had defeated her yet again.

“Okay, I’ll look into it.”

Even still, Harriet agreed to help.

* * *

Ellen didn't enter the Magic Research Society's mansion.

She told her that it would be fine to enter, but Ellen said she would wait outside.

Harriet didn't know much about parasites that could control people and the magic associated with them.

She had a fair bit of knowledge about magic, but she knew next to nothing about that subject.

If it was a parasite that could manipulate and even kill people, it would belong to the field of black magic, and a respectable wizard wouldn't care for such subjects.

Of course, that didn't mean that Anna de Gerna, a black magic major, wasn't a respectable wizard.

The most important thing was how the magic was used.

Pain-type curses that caused excruciating pain were strictly prohibited, but a fireball being thrown in the middle of a crowded square was worse by far.

Harriet had no clue about that supposed black magic, so she entered the club mansion and sought Anna.

Harriet was still a little uncomfortable around her.

It wasn't because of her somewhat gloomy appearance and tone.

Rather, every time she looked at Reinhardt, she seemed to get kind of…

Weird.

Her gaze seemed to contain something sticky.

She didn't know why, but Anna was strange to her.

It made her think that Anna was slightly dangerous.

It wasn't because she was majoring in black magic—it was that she simply seemed like a dangerous person. Reinhardt also felt it when he noticed Anna continuously

looking at him and felt burdened.

So Harriet felt a bit reluctant to go to Anna.

Still, she went to find her because it was Ellen's request.

Anna hadn't been instructed by Reinhardt to do anything.

Instead, she usually helped her classmate, Christina, with her research or studied from Louis Ankton how to manage her magical power better and optimize her activation.

"Bugs that can control people?"

"Yes. Are there such things? It might be Parasite-type magic."

"Hmm…"

Anna tilted her head as if she was troubled, and her eyes somewhat glazed over and darted around.

First to the left, then to the right, then to the left again…

After doing that for a while, Anna opened her strangely red lips that greatly contrasted her pale face.

"It might be the case for most black magic, but… Parasite-type magic was originally considered a taboo curse."

"You mean it isn't anymore?"

"Only for specific purposes."

"Which ones?"

"Parasite-type magic is… A type of magic that causes diseases or infections through parasite infestations."

"Ah… Yes. I know that."

Anna pointed towards Harriet

…Her chest, to be precise.

“What, Erm… What are…?”

What? Why is she doing that?

Is she comparing our sizes?

Even though Harriet, unprompted, suddenly started misunderstanding her actions, Anna only said what she had to say.

“That means that such parasites that could spread infectious diseases could be used to eliminate such diseases… For example, if you have a parasite in your body and you take in those other parasites… You’ll excrete them in the form of feces…”

“…Ah.”

That was what she meant?

Harriet still felt that her expression seemed somewhat burdensome.

“Can’t you control people with them as well?”

“I don’t know… There are so many different types of magic, after all… But I’m not sure… Even among mind-type spells, Mind Control is a high-ranking one… If that type of magic can be expressed through bugs…”

“…Yes, it doesn’t seem to make much sense.”

Mind-type spells in and of themselves were difficult to perform. However, from simple spells that showed hallucinations to Mind Control, the difficulty sharply increased.

A high-ranking spell comparable to Mind Control, which was said to be the highest-ranking spell of the mind-type spells, was Mass Teleport for space-type spells and Fire Storm for destruction-type spells.

Of course, since they were fundamentally different types, it didn’t mean that a wizard

who could use Mind Control could use Mass Teleport and Fire Storm.

Some worm replacing that type of high-ranking spell that could only be used by archmages?

That didn't make any sense.

Why was Ellen asking such a question with such urgency?

"What are you talking about?"

As Harriet and Anna were talking, Christina, who was working on various things in her lab, approached them with her goggles on.

Her head was about to explode from clamoring for this and that reagent and material for Moonshine.

She left the laboratory to relax a bit.

"Harriet asked… if there's black magic that could control people using bugs…"

"Bugs that can control people?"

Christina was a curious and outgoing sort.

It seemed like something that caught her interest came up, so her eyes were shining brightly.

"Why are you asking about that?"

"Well, I heard that there were things like that. I just wondered what kind of magic was behind those things, so I thought it might be black magic, but now I don't think that's the case anymore."

"Uuurg… Bugs that can control people? How terrible."

Christina shuddered, but then she lowered her head for a moment and took her goggles off before raising her head again as if she had remembered something.

"Right!"

“Did you remember something?”

“Do they look like hairworms?”

“Hairworms…? What are those?"

It was the first time Harriet had ever heard that word. There was no reason for a young lady, preciously raised by her family, to encounter something like hairworms, and there were no such insects in Temple, so there was no way for Harriet, who was already frightened by grasshoppers, to know about those monstrosities.

"What… are those things?”

Even Anna of the Gerna family, a family famous for producing excellent wizards in every generation, though not as many as Harriet’s family, didn’t know about those worms.

“Well, they are parasitic worms that live in the guts of other insects. They enter the organism in an egg state, grow inside of it, and when they mature, they control the insect to approach water, make them drown themselves, and finally crawl out of their stomachs. They look like threads and are very long.”

“!”

“…!!”

* * *

Both Harriet and Anna were surprised by that blunt explanation, shocked by Christina, who maintained a bright smile as she explained, and freaked out that such a vicious being existed in the world.

“If you don’t know what they are, do you want me to draw a picture for you?”

“N-no! That’s fine!”

“I feel like vomiting…”

Apart from feeling disgusted, they seemed extremely shocked at such a nefarious being's existence.

“So isn’t that bug like a hairworm that controls people?”

“A-are there parasites like that?!”

“Where do you find them…?”

Harriet was extremely shocked, but Anna, who just said that she would puke, glanced at Christina as if her interest had been piqued.

If such bugs existed, it was clear what they would be used for.

Harriet’s worry for Reinhardt spiked.

She didn’t know what was going on, but she was certain that something would happen sooner or later!

“There aren’t… As far as I know, at least.”

“Phew. That’s a relief.”

“…What a shame.”

Harriet tried to ignore the muted voice coming from next to her, pretending that she didn’t hear anything. Christina looked at Harriet.

“But I don’t know everything. There might be a bug like that, and we simply don’t know about its existence.”

“Do you really think that there is a possibility of them existing?”

“If there aren’t any, we can make some.”

A thought flashed through Harriet’s mind at Christina’s dangerous words.

‘If it doesn’t exist, just make it.’ Harriet specialized in magic, but Christina was an Alchemy major.

Alchemy students thought in terms of alchemy.

‘If it doesn’t exist, just make it.’

That concept was clearly prevalent in the field of alchemy.

“Are you talking about Chimeras or Homunculi?”

“It’s a forbidden practice, and you’d be sentenced to death immediately if anyone knew you were practicing such a thing, but you know?”

Christina smiled brightly.

“The ratio of crazy wizards is a lot higher among alchemists than black wizards.”

Harriet knew…

Black wizards were rather antisocial, but that was just from an outsider’s view.

There were many alchemists hunted down or purged for doing some really crazy things in the wizard’s society.

In fact, there were no externally-known black wizards who were also alchemists.

Those who majored in both likely died from their own crazy experiments.

“It could be a chimera with the improved capabilities of a hairworm that makes it able to control humans or a homunculus created for that purpose.”

Chimeras were made by using existing creatures as a base.

Homunculi were living beings made from inanimate objects, not biological matter.

They were different from golems.

Just as mana trains weren’t alive, golems were just a sort of machine.

Homunculi were alive.

That worm that was able to control humans could be the result of either of those practices.

“Is it possible to create something like that?”

"I don’t really know if it’s possible or not, but don’t you think it might be?”

Alchemists were those who explored different possibilities; they were slightly different from most wizards.

“In alchemy, we have things like recipes, so one can make such things just by following a recipe, right? As long as there are no parts that require magical power, even ordinary people could make them.”

“That’s right… It can’t be…!”

Harriet listened to Christina’s words, widening her eyes as she thought of the possibilities.

“Even if one isn’t on the level of an archmage, one could make as many copies of them as one wanted if one had the recipe of the homunculus or chimera made by an archmage. Of course, assuming that it’s detailed enough.”

Christina was laughing, but the content of her words was incredibly creepy.

“I don't know if something like that really exists, of course. But… that’s different from saying it definitely doesn’t exist! I wonder if there’s actually anything in the world that could be described with the word “absolute”.”

Harriet was convinced by her words.

There was already a creature in nature that could control other insects that wasn’t even of magical nature. That would mean that it wasn’t impossible.

Magic could make the impossible possible.

So making something that was already proven to be possible more potent was a rather easy feat for magic.

“Hmm? Come to think of it. What if a recipe already existed? Could I make something like that as well?”

Harriet was certain of it…

Anna was clearly problematic. Although she didn’t appear like that at first, she was a

serious nutcase.

“Do you… want to make… something like that?"

"Guys, please…”

Harriet was genuinely worried about the Class B students.

'Reinhardt… Be careful… ’

She didn’t know what happened, but Harriet once more vowed to protect Reinhardt from the nutcases of the Magic Research Society.

* * *

Harriet left the mansion and approached Ellen, who had been waiting for a long time, leaning against a tree in the garden.

“We don’t know if it actually exists, but we think it’s more likely that something like that could be made using alchemy rather than black magic.”

Ellen nodded silently after hearing the details.

“Thanks, Harriet.”

“Won’t you tell me… what’s going on?”

Ellen lowered her gaze at Harriet’s words.

“Does it have something to do with Reinhardt…?”

“…”

Ellen didn’t answer.

However, that was answer enough.

“Y-you know… sometimes… you’re really, really… yes.”

Harriet struggled to speak as she looked at Ellen, who couldn’t even meet her eyes.

“I think you’re really, really unfair…”

Harriet couldn’t see what expression Ellen, who had lowered her head, was wearing.

However, she could guess what her face looked like without seeing it.

She probably wore a pathetic expression.

Was she really saying those things to a friend?

“…Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I was talking nonsense.”

Harriet stole a glance from the corner of her eyes. While she didn’t cry, she felt like she did that for no reason.

"Well, tell me something else then.”

“…What?”

“Who?”

Ellen looked up at her remark.

Harriet asked, her eyes bloodshot, about something she had been curious about for a long time but hadn’t asked Ellen out of consideration.

“Who are you?”

“…”

Ellen could tell from her expression just how long Harriet had been wondering about that.

Ellen wasn’t an ordinary person.

Harriet knew that she couldn’t be anyone normal. She just didn’t ask up to that point because she thought Ellen wouldn’t give her an answer.

“Ellen…”

“That’s not—”

“Ellen Artorius.”

“…!!”

Harriet’s expression hardened at her words.

Ellen didn’t explain anything further.

That last name was explanation enough.

It wasn’t like she just happened to have the same last name as the hero.

Harriet felt a lot of her doubts getting resolved all at once.

Why was she so strong? Why was she carrying a soul-bound sword? Why did she always seem so determined?

Why?

Why didn’t she hesitate at all when throwing herself in danger?

Harriet had finally found the answer to her questions.

“Does… Reinhardt know?”

“…Yes.”

I see.

The secret she had just told her, a secret no one else in Temple knew…

Those two had been sharing it for a very long time already.

“…I thought I had at least one thing over you.”

Harriet laughed softly with a sense of despondency and self-deprecation.

Her background…

She had no intention of just clinging to that one pitiful thing.

However, even in that regard, she had been pushed back.

So Harriet couldn't help but laugh.

She didn't hate Ellen—she absolutely dismissed herself.

"I'm sorry…"

"Don't say you're sorry."

Harriet looked at Ellen, who had lowered her head again, and twisted the corners of her mouth.

She wanted to cry, but her tears just wouldn't come out.

She couldn't even cry in that situation.

"You have no idea… just how… miserable that makes me."

If someone who always walks a few steps ahead of you just turns around and says sorry… do you know just how painful that is for the other person to hear?

Ellen finally realized how Harriet felt upon hearing her apology.

"I'm…"

Ellen forcibly swallowed down the words that were about to come out.

The words "I'm sorry"

In the end, didn't those words actually stem from her sense of superiority over Harriet?

Ellen could see the bad sides of herself in those words. She didn't think so, but could she be sure that wasn't the case even a little bit?

Did she really feel no superiority over Harriet de Saint-Owan?

Even then, she wanted to monopolize Reinhardt's affairs while arguing that she didn't want to put Harriet in danger, and it was hurting her.

Was it right for her to make that choice for Harriet?

She didn't even try to talk to her.

But, from Harriet's words, Ellen had no other choice but to tell her.

If her behavior stemmed from something as insignificant as a sense of superiority…

She had to throw it away.

"There's someone who wants to kill Reinhardt."

"…Huh?"

Seeing the dumbfounded Harriet, Ellen could calmly look at her and properly talk to her.

"I will kill that person."

Ellen didn't try to manage her expression because she chose not to hide anything.

"Do you want to help me?"

Harriet was stunned by Ellen's sudden offer.

However, as straightforward as Ellen's words were, they contained the truth.

The weight they carried was by no means light.

"Yes. I do."

However, Harriet's hesitation didn't last long.

While she only thought about it for a short time, her decision wasn't made lightly.

CHAPTER 254

Ellen shared everything that had happened with Harriet. Reinhardt's strange behavior, the assassination attempt that started everything, and what she had been able to confirm that day.

Harriet was horrified to find out that Ellen had witnessed that human-controlling bug with her own eyes.

"I can't believe that there's really a human-manipulating hairworm…"

"Hairworm?"

Ellen tilted her head as if she had never heard of the insect called a hairworm.

"It… It's something that… infests the intestines of insects and… U-urg…"

Harriet tried to repeat Christina's explanation, but she only grew pale as she tried. Harriet was so smart that she could recall the locusts and mantises whose stomachs were stuffed with those thread-like worms, so she took mental damage while she was talking.

"Anyway, they are insects that can control other insects…"

"Are they made with magic as well?"

"No, it's just like that by nature…"

"Interesting."

While it was bizarre logic to assume that, since there were insects that were able to control other insects, there were insects that could control humans as well if magic got thrown in the mix, it wasn't as bizarre if they actually existed.

That line of reasoning led to alchemy rather than black magic.

Of course, that didn't mean that black magic wasn't involved at all. If black magic was

used in alchemy, one could use black-magic-type alchemy, so one couldn't be certain that it was completely irrelevant.

Could they determine what kind of magic had been used just with that parasite as the first clue?

They couldn't be certain. However, that was all they had.

"Let's go ask Mr. Mustrang."

"Yes."

It might be something they had no knowledge of because they were still students, so Ellen and Harriet decided to go ask one of their homeroom teachers.

* * *

Homeroom teachers of the Royal Class usually didn't have any dedicated lectures they were in charge of—they were focused on protecting and managing the members of their class. They were talented individuals who were able to take immediate action in case of an emergency.

If they were asked to hold lectures, they would be able to do it, however, they were simply teachers who were tasked with the management of the Royal Class.

Therefore, just like the individual teachers resided in a dormitory, the homeroom teachers also lived in Temple. As such, when an accident occurred, they would be called upon, even on weekends.

"He's a funny person."

"Is that so?"

Harriet commented on Mr. Mustrang as they traveled to the faculty quarters.

While Mr. Mustrang wasn't an alchemist, he was the advisor of the Magic Research Society. He would sometimes check on the children who were studying while giving them bits of advice.

Since their research projects were on such a large scale, he would sometimes try to

tell them how things were done, however, after some time, he let his worries rest and just idled away next to the students.

He would often be left alone in his seat, self-deprecatingly calling himself an incompetent teacher.

His self-esteem had been falling endlessly those days.

Visiting the faculty's living quarters in Temple, Harriet took the lead to Mr. Mustrang's room to ask him a very specific question.

Is it possible to use alchemy to make bugs that can control people?

"Guuys! You absolutely can't make these kinds of thiiings!"

Mr. Mustrang, who was plagued by a lot of worries, grabbed Harriet, seeming incredibly frightened.

Ellen seemed to understand why Harriet thought that he was quite amusing.

Mr. Mustrang calmed down when they said that they had gone there to ask that because they were simply curious, even though he didn't really know the details.

After sitting down at a nearby cafe, they ordered some drinks.

"Homunculi or chimeras that can control people… Why are you curious about something like that?"

Mr. Mustrang still seemed worried.

"Just because. I think I heard someone talking about such things somewhere."

"Are there things like that?"

"Well… If there was, no matter what type of magic they were made with, they most certainly would belong to the prohibited ones. Prohibited spells are literally forbidden spells, so there is very little information about them. I can't even tell you if there are spells that can achieve something like that."

Being a teacher made no difference in that matter.

“Still… Bugs that can control people… While I don’t think anyone would have even tried making something like that…”

Still, Mr. Mustrang knew the madness of wizards a lot better than his students. There were those whose pursuit of happiness turned into madness, so there were those that dabbled in the forbidden. There were more unknown than there were known things in that world, after all.

“I believe that you guys don’t plan on creating something like that, but you should never dabble in that kind of research or even talk about it outside just because you’re curious, okay? If you do, it would be pretty hard for us to protect you.”

“Of course we won’t. Ellen isn’t even a magic major student.”

“Yes, but still…”

Mr. Mustang tended to worry excessively, so it seemed like he was very worried that the kids were thinking of creating strange things. He looked at Ellen and Harriet’s faces and smiled at both of them.

"Alright. I don’t know what you two are up to, but if someone ever did something like that, the Taboo Hunters wouldn’t leave them alone.”

Taboo Hunters.

Ellen and Harriet tilted their heads at those words.

Neither of them had heard of that group before.

“Taboo Hunters?”

"What are those?”

“Aah, right. It’s not surprising that you don’t know of them. Nothing good comes from knowing that group…”

Mr. Mustrang spoke in a low voice.

“Have you ever heard of Magic Societies?”

“Yes, I know of them.”

While both Ellen and Harriet knew that such groups existed, they didn’t know the specifics.

“They are one of those Magic Societies. They are hunters who hunt wizards that break taboos.”

“Mr. Mustrang… Please don’t pass on speculative information to students.”

Ellen and Harriet turned around after hearing a familiar voice coming from behind them.

"M-Mr. Epinhauser?!”

* * *

Mr. Epinhauser, wearing his usual cold expression, was looking down at the three of them. He was wearing comfortable clothes, completely different from his usual suit, perhaps because he just stopped by as he was passing them. Ellen and Harriet were staring at him wearing casual clothes as if he was some sort of rare animal.

Of course, even though the clothes he wore were different, his attitude towards them was still the same.

Mr. Mustrang’s face turned red as if he had been caught playing a prank.

“Th-the Taboo Hunters exist!”

However, his expression was just like a child who completely believed in some urban legend.

Certainly, the Taboo Hunters were more like a legend. Mr. Mustrang just enjoyed those kinds of stories.

He was the complete opposite of Mr. Epinhauser.

“…They should exist.”

“…Pardon?”

“But one shouldn’t go around talking about them too much. They haven’t been properly identified yet.”

Mr. Epinhauser was just there to get a drink, so he walked away when he was done.

“…You get along unexpectedly well.

Harriet was amazed at the experience of coincidentally meeting Mr. Epinhauser acting familiar with Mr. Mustrang.

“H-hahaha… Actually, he doesn’t really talk to me after work hours except when it concerns work. I think today was the first time he did so this year…”

Even the word “affectionless” was too much to describe Mr. Epinhauser. It seemed like he didn’t really share any private things except for when it concerned his work.

Still, the year was already nearing its end.

When he said to Harriet that it was his first time talking to him about something other than work, she looked stunned.

Is it necessary for him to separate his private and work affairs this thoroughly?

That was what Harriet thought.

It was quite rare for Mr. Mustrang to react so harshly. While all Magic Societies were secret organizations, there were some rumors, often exaggerations, floating about the known Societies. However, the one thing they had in common was the Black Order.

All of the rumors were of cases where they caused harm to the world. From small things such as assassinations to large-scale things like using a whole village as their experiment sites. It seemed like a wizard under a certain feudal lord actually tried to swallow his lord’s territory after receiving the order from the Black Order.

Their purpose was unknown, but they were beings that caused great harm to the world.

However, as was the case with Magic Societies, no details had been revealed about either the Black Order or the Taboo Hunters.

“Anyway, if you kids want to learn more about this, you’ll have to ask someone who majored in alchemy and not me.”

He took out a notebook and wrote down the address of such a professor’s office as well as their name.

[Aaron Mede]

“He’s one of the teachers in charge of the alchemy lectures in Temple. He gives lectures exclusively to high-ranking students, so his skills are certain.

If he doesn’t know of the existence of something like that, it most certainly doesn’t exist. Since he’s a teacher only in charge of holding lectures, he won’t be in Temple during the weekend.”

It was an alchemist recommended by Mr. Mustrang. That meant that his knowledge of the matter wouldn’t be lacking. Normally, they would have waited until the next week, but Ellen and Harriet were in a hurry.

They were in urgent need of information.

That was why Harriet hurriedly spoke up again.

“Can’t we go to his home directly?”

“Hmm… Coming to meet me aside… Please don’t be rude now. While he has an amiable personality, it’s not very polite to suddenly visit him on the weekend. You know that, right?”

Ellen and Harriet nodded upon seeing Mr. Mustrang’s concerned expression.

* * *

“Is this for certain?”

"While I’m not completely sure, it certainly involves some form of forbidden art. Even if they don’t mean to harm Your Highness, if this were to come to light, they wouldn’t be able to avoid the death penalty.”

I nodded as I listened to Sarkegaar’s report. He passed the information he had found

out to me in my private room located in Temple's dormitory.

"Wizards are people who can do a lot of things in a short amount of time. It's not like them to run away."

The mansion of Aaron Mede, the professor in charge of Alchemy at Temple, wasn't very large, but the property was fairly big.

While the mansion could hardly be called simple, it was still far inferior to other mansions.

In fact, all the substantial facilities were underground—facilities for researching many forbidden dark arts. I was looking at something similar to a wiggling worm before me.

Disgusting.

It looked like a hairworm, but it was completely black.

A sparrow had flown toward me with the worm in its beak, so I thought it wasn't Sarkegaar at first.

"He planted this in other people and tried to kill you using a borrowed knife. It's…"

"A homunculus."

"Yes, a magical creature. Fortunately, it seems unable to pass through Temple's barrier, but… it can be brought in through the air."

When one crossed the entrance of Temple, 'Dispel' would be cast over the person. Homunculi were magical creatures, so the best way to deal with them was through 'Dispel'.

However, Sarkegaar had flown in, and the homunculus was still alive since 'Dispel' wasn't cast on it.

His attempt on my life aside, Aaron Mede was a guy whose death would benefit the world greatly. Perhaps the assassin on that day wasn't Aaron Mede himself but someone controlled by the special creature.

After he saw that I noticed, he decided to be careful.

He wasn't a teacher who belonged to the Orbis Class; that was why he still remained in Temple

However, killing me directly inside Temple posed too high a risk.

—So he was trying to kill me outside of Temple.

"What do you want to do? I can handle this matter, Your Highness."

I told Sarkegaar to just observe and not take action for the moment, which was why Sarkegaar gave reports like that. If I hadn't said anything, Sarkegaar would have killed Aaron Mede right then and there.

"I'll have to do it myself."

"Why does it have to be Your Highness? You can just use my, Eleris's, and Loyar's power."

The culprit had been identified, so I didn't have to feel nervous anymore.

"No, there are some questions I want to ask him myself."

I'd found the guy who had tried to kill me.

Killing him was a natural conclusion, but I still had some things I wanted to ask him before that.

I got up from my seat.

"Let's go. Sparrow."

"…"

While Sarkegaar seemed to sulk a bit, he still obediently turned into a sparrow.

CHAPTER 255

Temple's Alchemy teacher Aaron Mede was in a bad mood.

Even among all the talented teachers, he was in a class of his own. He was someone who only taught elite students, so the students that were in his lectures were excellent students of either the Orbis Class or a general class.

Personally, he didn't like the Royal Class because they only believed in talent and had too many arrogant kids.

Strictly speaking, he didn't hate the Royal Class, he just preferred the Orbis Class.

He liked their desperation.

He liked their attitude of being willing to do anything for success.

That kind of desperation blinded one's insight, and if one held out a tempting offer in their blurred state, most children would simply fall for it.

A place that gathered the best talents of the Empire where one just had to stretch out their hand to catch those with the greatest potential.

A place where one could execute biological experiments and see the results in real-time. A place where experimental subjects simply replenished on their own.

Temple was the only place that met those requirements.

However, that cradle suddenly vanished.

The psycho of Royal Class, Reinhardt, had suddenly decided to mess everything up.

Technically speaking, the real cause was the strange collective action of the Orbis Class students and teachers, but even so, the root of it was still Reinhardt.

The place that supplied him with willing test subjects, among them the most capable new additions, suddenly disappeared.

The one who messed up his experiment…

He couldn't do anything about the collective Orbis Class boycott, so he put that matter aside.

If that guy died inside of Temple, the problem would just grow bigger and pose a threat to him, so he tried to kill him outside of Temple.

He felt confident that he wouldn't get caught if he used his forbidden arts.

People could die surprisingly easily. No matter how strong a knight was, it was common sense that they would die swiftly if they were stabbed in their sleep.

Furthermore, no matter how excellent he was, he was still a student. Killing him should have been easy.

If that guy died, it wouldn't be him who would get suspected, it would be the Orbis Class, so the circumstances were perfect, and he wouldn't get exposed.

However, for some reason, he immediately felt the presence of the assassin Aaron planted a worm in. Seeing his target flee in a hurry, the assassin felt the need to stay hidden.

After that guy sensed the danger he was in, he didn't leave Temple from that point on.

He could have killed Reinhardt inside of Temple because he wasn't kicked out like the Orbis Class Teachers. However, he felt immensely reluctant to take on any risks.

There was no need for him to do that.

As long as Reinhardt remained in Temple, he was within his range.

He wouldn't be able to stay in Temple forever, either.

The moment he crawled out of Temple, his demise would be sealed.

However, things were taking a rather strange turn.

The other student who was with Reinhardt at that time… When he noticed her

leaving Temple, he thought that it was an opportunity he had to take.

He would secretly follow her, overpower her, and use her as a hostage to drag Reinhardt out of Temple.

Even if she was part of the Royal Class, she was just a first-year at most. He thought it wouldn't be a problem as long as he took her by surprise.

There was no need to expose himself because he could simply use the parasite hosts.

However, where did things go wrong?

She was already aware that someone was tailing her and actually seemed to want it.

It turned out that the girl was the strongest monster ever recorded in the history of Temple, although he didn't really know any details.

His error was that he neglected to gather information on students of the close combat majors because he was a wizard himself.

Fortunately, his taboo arts were completely unknown to the world outside of the Order.

They wouldn't be able to find him with just that. The evidence was already gone, after all.

It was a forbidden spell the Order used to secretly kill people.

All of his anger and irritation made him feel restless.

How could he have expected that a first-year student of Royal Class would seemingly have eyes on the back of her head?

As such, he tried to find a more definite, detailed way to kill Reinhardt.

However…

"A bug that can control people?"

"Yes, can someone make something like that with alchemy?"

The girl who had caught his host last time actually went to his mansion with another student in tow.

What were the chances?

Aaron Mede was dumbfounded that things were going so well for him.

* * *

Aaron didn't know about Ellen up until then, but he already knew the magic major student, Harriet de Saint-Owan.

He was a lot more interested in Harriet than Ellen.

She was the greatest magic genius in the famous Saint-Owan family's history. No, she might've even been the greatest genius of the whole continent.

A kid with the 'Magic' Talent had never appeared before.

While it seemed like the person herself wasn't aware of it, she was the one that gathered the most interest from his acquaintances.

Of course, Aaron Mede didn't share that interest.

Those who were born with talent were always arrogant.

He liked the ungifted who fought for their strength—like those in the Orbis Class. He believed the ruthlessness and viciousness of those who struggled to get stronger made them susceptible to temptation.

That was why Harriet de Saint-Owan, who was born with great strength and didn't know what she lacked, only seemed like a human without any desperation for improvement.

He didn't do his experiments under the guise of granting others strength because he was evil. Rather than that, he very much thought of his experiments as gifts.

He didn't grant anything to those who weren't desperate. Therefore, even though she was a top talent, he was uninterested in Harriet de Saint-Owan.

She was simply amazing.

Just how did that coincidence come to be?

Did two high-quality pieces of bait that would be perfect for luring Reinhardt out of Temple really just walk to him freely?

They said they were there on the recommendation of the Royal Class teacher, Mr. Mustrang.

Ellen was there after she unsuccessfully asked around while trying to find out the truth about the worm that crawled from the host.

She had no idea that she was in a place she should have never stepped foot in.

Those two students, who had no idea that he was breeding hundreds of those worms in the basement, just seemed like innocent kids who simply wanted to sate their curiosity.

They were the two students who actively decided to get involved with the assassination attempt on Reinhardt.

Those two had to be very precious to Reinhardt, so they'd certainly make great bait.

Being granted the pleasure of trampling on the arrogant, budding talents of the Royal Class was a bonus.

"Hmm… While I do believe that there is nothing in this field that I don't know, I do have to say that alchemists are the types of people who like to experiment if they even believe there is a hint of success."

However, that was difficult to do at the moment.

If those two students who were there on the recommendation of Mr. Mustrang were to disappear right then, there was a high chance that he would be immediately suspected.

"I think I've heard of some people who use such things…"

"R-really? Are you sure?"

"…"

Harriet's expression suddenly changed at the mention of a possibly meaningful clue. Ellen's eyes also slightly widened.

"It'll take me some time to go through all the data, so I'll send a message to Royal Class when I'm done."

"Thank you! Thank you very much, teacher!"

He sent them back for the moment because it was close to stupidity to lay his hands on them right then.

"Since you came all the way here, how about a cup of tea?"

He poured some warm tea into cups for the two innocent students.

He would send them back, but he needed some insurance.

Alchemy was a science that could work with or without magic.

In that case, magic wasn't part of it.

In other words, Dispel wouldn't work on what he was doing.

Aaron Mede was poisoning the two.

He used a slow-acting poison. Its symptoms would only appear after more than a month. The functions of their cardiovascular system would gradually worsen, and their hearts would eventually stop.

Without the antidote, they would simply drop dead one day.

It was already verified that there was no other way to cure the poison. Not even divine magic would work.

If the situation didn't pan out as he wanted, he could use the antidote as an excuse to lure out Reinhardt.

It was that kind of insurance.

“Ah, yes… Thank you.”

Harriet carefully placed her hands around the cup.

Drink it.

* * *

Aaron Mede smiled faintly at the thought that he would receive the corpse of that arrogant madman who had ruined all his experiments if he just waited a month.

He himself had the antidote, after all, so he could casually savor the poisoned tea.

It was a tasteless and odorless poison that couldn’t be detected.

Ellen didn’t even touch the tea. It was like she wasn’t even tempted to drink it.

Harriet was about to drink from her cup but then tilted her head slightly and put it down.

“By the way, I have a question I want to ask you.”

Aaron Mede noticed a sparkling green earring hanging from Harriet’s ear.

Wearing jewelry wasn’t forbidden in Temple, but for something the young lady of the Saint-Owan Duchy was wearing, the earrings design didn’t really seem all that luxurious.

Harriet put her cup down completely.

“Why aren’t you asking us why we’re curious about something like that?”

Harriet felt uncomfortable.

Everyone else had been curious about their interest in such things. Even she had initially questioned it.

When she had initially heard Ellen ask about those things, she also wondered why the hell she wanted to know about something like that. It was an alarming and bizarre question.

The members of the Magic Research Society were the same, and so was Mr. Mustrang.

All of them had asked why they were curious about worms that could control humans.

However, Aaron Mede wasn't curious, and that was what made her feel uncomfortable.

That, however, wasn't much of a problem. Aaron Mede simply smiled softly at Harriet's question.

''Wizards, especially students, are curious about a wide range of things, after all. You'd be surprised at how many bizarre questions I've heard since the start of my career. I'm simply used to answering strange questions at this point."

"Oh, I see."

Aaron Mede's answer made sense.

He noticed that the little kids in front of him didn't even touch their teacups and that they were wary of him.

They weren't just some talented kids, they also had great insight.

He knew that trying to force them to drink the tea would backfire. Harriet looked around the mansion's office.

"And this place… How should I put it…? It's strange."

Harriet continued to calmly look around.

She wasn't merely looking around; it seemed like she was trying to sense the space itself.

"I can't feel any power coming from the leyline."

"Leyline? What do you mean?"

Harriet was constantly ordered to do absurd things by Reinhardt.

Why don't you try studying dimensional magic? While you're at it, try to activate magic with external instead of internal mana.

She hadn't succeeded in any of that, but she was in the process of getting there.

Natural mana… She was far from being able to use magic with it, but she had gotten very used to feeling and analyzing the mana present in the atmosphere. Of course, other wizards could do that as well, but Harriet, who had focused on it, was a lot more sensitive.

Mana was omnipresent, but the concentration varied from place to place. Even in the same space, its concentration could be different. Being able to control such irregularly concentrated mana was a rather doubtful prospect.

Although she hadn't reached her true goal, what she gained from her research was enough for her to sense the peculiarity of the place.

She couldn't feel the leyline's mana below the mansion at all.

It felt as if a huge hole was in the middle of a vast ocean.

She didn't know what was below the mansion, but she could tell that a barrier constructed with the function of obscuring what was down there was in place.

"I know that barriers intended to hide things have similar effects."

There was a space underneath the mansion enchanted so that outsiders wouldn't be able to look into it through magical means.

"Wizards, especially alchemists, are sensitive to such matters. It's not surprising that I had something like that made. I'm an alchemist, after all."

Aaron Mede was an alchemist.

It was a legitimate argument that alchemists were especially concerned with security. They wouldn't want others to look into their laboratories, after all.

Harriet knew that as well, but there was something else she found suspicious.

Its scale…

It was simply too large.

Although he was said to be an excellent alchemist, for him to have a laboratory under the mansion that stretched out for six floors underground was a bit excessive.

“This is quite uncomfortable. You said that you wanted to ask me some questions, but is it just my imagination, or is this an interrogation?”

Aaron Mede didn’t hide his displeasure.

He let those two in because he was curious, but they suddenly began to notice something strange and started to doubt him.

He couldn’t let it go on any longer.

He had to make them leave.

He could forcibly capture them and use them as bait right then, but that would completely blow away the foundation he had built in Temple.

He was just trying to lure out that useless guy, but things had become twisted.

However, it was then that Ellen, who had been silent up to that point, opened her mouth.

“Do homunculi disappear when Dispel is cast on them?”

“……What rude kids you are. Fine, I’ll answer. Homunculi are creatures made of magic, so if Dispel is cast on them, they disappear.”

“…Then, if the type of homunculus we’ve been talking about was controlling a human, what would happen to them if it was Dispelled?”

“……”

Aaron seemed to feel a cold shower running over his back.

What was that girl talking about?

“Well… While I don’t know the details, the parasitic Homunculus would disappear

from their bodies or they would die."

Aaron Mede knew that it was the latter. The infestation of a Homunculus was permanent. When the Homunculus died, so would its host.

No, as soon as someone was infested and controlled by one, they would already be dead.

"Why are you asking something like that?"

"We're going to deploy an Antimagic Field throughout this mansion from this point on," Ellen said calmly.

"……What?!"

"If anyone in this mansion is controlled by a Homunculus, they'll drop dead. If nothing happens, I will apologize. If you want to punish us and have us pay you compensation for property damage, we will do so."

An Antimagic Field…

It was a magic barrier that far surpassed the effect of a wide-area Dispel that suppressed all use of magic.

A student was capable of casting that high-ranking of a spell?

Aaron Mede's eyes widened.

Harriet de Saint-Owan might actually be history's greatest genius in the field of magic.

That was a serious problem.

Those kids were about to do something incredibly insane on the grounds of mere speculation.

If they were to deploy the Antimagic Field, naturally, many of the slaves he kept in this mansion would turn into corpses. His expression calmed again.

"There really are only annoying people in the Royal Class."

He didn’t like either of them.

He would end up losing everything if he kept being passive.

He had to resort to extreme measures to prevent that from happening.

“Die.”

-Flaare!

A fireball flew out of Aaron Mede’s wand, which was promptly blocked by Harriet’s forcefield.

“I really… didn’t expect that it was actually you.”

“I told you, Harriet.”

Aaron Mede looked at the silver sword that Ellen had suddenly summoned into her right hand.

"Threatening works a lot better than interrogating.”

“Right…”

Those two had been suspicious of Aaron Mede from the start.

CHAPTER 256

Aaron was surprised that Harriet was able to easily block his attack magic, and his shock was brought to a new level when he saw the sword Ellen suddenly summoned.

“Lament…?”

How did a student get their hands on a god’s Divine Artifact? Aaron saw multiple things that left him baffled.

Harriet looked at him, her forcefield still unfolded.

"There’s no way that I already know how to create Antimagic Fields or anything like that.”

He felt as if he had been hit over the head with a hammer.

He’d fallen for a little kid’s bluff. There was no way a student could cast such high-ranking magic already.

He held Harriet in such high esteem that he lost his cool when faced with such threats.

It had already happened—Aaron Mede had taken off his mask.

“Well, I don’t know what you two found that led to your suspicion of me, but it seems like you haven’t yet realized your grave mistake.”

Alchemy’s secret arts were the easiest to steal among all magic-related fields. Even those who couldn’t use magic sometimes swiped them and made use of them, and that was why wizards employed heavy security measures around their laboratories.

The dangerous constructs known as ‘dungeons’ were also the handiwork of some paranoid wizards who needed guaranteed security to protect their easy-to-steal items.

“I’ll show you just what happens when you enter an alchemist’s house.”

An alchemist's laboratory was the most secure of all magic-type laboratories.

-Snap!

"!"

"That's…!"

Aaron Mede's body disappeared behind a wall and the door through which Ellen and Harriet had entered vanished while the windows were blocked with opaque protection barriers.

-Clatter! Clatter!

In addition to that, magical crossbows appeared from thin air and took aim at them while blue smoke poured out of mana stones that were embedded in the walls and furniture around the room.

Physical attacks, poisonous mist, and changes to the room itself…

An alchemist's house was like a dungeon; entering it without permission was akin to suicide.

Harriet laughed.

His identity had been revealed, so there was no need to hesitate anymore.

"I mean, I said I couldn't personally cast the spell, but did you really think I didn't have anything up my sleeve?"

Harriet pulled a scroll from her clothes, and the pages automatically turned with Harriet's hand gestures before a scroll separated itself from the book and began glowing.

Harriet was a wizard, but before that, she was incredibly rich.

-Raise!

The Antimagic Field scroll activated.

* * *

Before Harriet and Ellen entered Aaron Mede's mansion…

"I think it's here."

"I guess so."

Ellen pointed towards the faraway mansion.

Aaron Mede's mansion was on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital. Although the area wasn't completely uninhabited with no other buildings around, it was still located in a place people rarely visited.

It didn't seem that luxurious, quite the opposite, it seemed rather simple.

Mr. Mustrang recommended him because he was an expert in alchemy and had excellent skills.

He only mentioned Aaron Mede because he didn't know about any homunculi that could control people.

As such, they went to visit that Temple alchemy teacher.

Both Ellen and Harriet had some suspicions that they might have to face some uncomfortable truths.

It was weird to suspect a Temple teacher, but there was no reason for them not to be careful. They weren't playing detective, after all. They were trying to personally get rid of the assassin.

"What do you think?"

Harriet shrugged at Ellen's question.

"It's suspicious, but… it's not that weird. There's no such thing as a wizard without a few secrets. Now that I think of it, a wizard who doesn't set up a laboratory or a workshop in their basement would be even stranger. It's a little big, of course."

Feeling the massive magic barrier spreading under the mansion, Harriet commented

as such.

"Can't you see inside?"

"I don't know how to forcibly disarm a magic barrier of that size, also, just my attempt of trying to look into it would get detected. If he isn't hiding anything bad, the problem would get even bigger because that would mean that I lifted the barrier of another person's property with no permission or reason."

The person they were about to meet wasn't just some normal teacher.

She was being careful. Ellen might've been fine as is, but when he told her to get prepared well before going, Harriet quickly grabbed the scroll book her father had given her in case something happened.

The magic spells contained in that scroll book, which could only be opened with her biometric information, were beyond anyone's imagination. To be frank, she already had as much destructive power as a whole wizard corps with the spellbook alone.

It was priceless.

"Just take a look and apologize later if you think it's necessary."

Harriet was so shocked by Ellen's words that she felt the need to put on the earrings Reinhardt had given her.

Feeling a little calmer, Harriet sighed.

"Would it just end with an apology…?"

"If it's not enough, there's nothing we can do."

Hearing Ellen speak so nonchalantly convinced Harriet that Ellen was starting to resemble Reinhardt more and more.

* * *

She's a monster.

Aaron Mede couldn't banish that thought from his mind.

The Antimagic Field neutralized all magically-operated traps and facilities.

The spell wasn't omnipotent, and it wouldn't be able to neutralize everything, but the level of the spell she used was just too high. It was a scroll owned by the young lady of the Saint-Owan Duchy that was famous for its magic.

The magic contained in the scroll was very different from ordinary scrolls one could buy.

Yes, let's say that's possible.

There were also mechanical traps that worked using engines in Aaron Mede's mansion which would still work.

-Bang!

-Bang!

-Bang! Babang!

The students might as well have been monsters as they broke through the mansion's doors toward her.

He was in a bizarre situation of having to escape from his own mansion.

A single student surrounded by blue flames caused by Magic Body Strengthening broke through various walls and strode towards him.

She simply walked through every wall in her path toward him.

If they didn't break with just her walking through them, she would cut through them with her sword, Lament.

The Divine Artifact of Mensis, the god of the moon, was said to possess a blade as cold and sharp as moonlight.

Aaron Mede was experiencing the power of that Divine Artifact in a way he least wanted.

Was there any difference between her and a Swordmaster? Attacks wouldn't work

on a body strengthened with magical power, and the Divine Artifact was making up for the characteristic power of a Swordmaster called Blade Aura.

-Thud! Bam! Babam!

Aaron Mede desperately ran from Ellen, who just bashed through walls if she didn't see any doors.

She was even going in his direction as if she could feel where he was running to without actually seeing him.

He could have gotten away with a Teleport scroll, but that damn young lady's Antimagic Field was blocking the use of any kind of magic. Of course, she couldn't use any magic either, but there was a monster completely unrelated to magic following after him.

Even if they weren't on the level of a Swordmaster, the servants of the mansion could have bought him some time at least, but they all collapsed as soon as the Antimagic Field was activated.

Before he knew it, Aaron Mede entered his own underground laboratory.

The situation there was the same as above. The homunculi he was studying had all either fallen apart or ceased to function.

He went even farther into his laboratory.

It didn't just contain homunculi, after all.

"…"

After breaking through the reinforced door of the underground laboratory, Ellen carefully took in everything she saw, her body still enveloped in blue flames.

There were all sorts of strange specimens in pots, chimeras that seemed to still be alive, various life forms connected together in fascinating ways, and half-human half-animal chimeras as well that looked like humans with demon-like appendages.

"You…"

Ellen looked at Aaron Mede, her magical flames rising.

“You must die.”

No matter what happened, Ellen swore to kill Aaron Mede.

“He, hehe…”

Aaron Mede’s underground laboratory was built under the vast expanse of his mansion.

It was very wide, and there were many specimens inside of it—specimens that weren’t affected by the Antimagic Field.

—Chimeras.

-Clang!

Aaron Mede pulled a lever to open the pods, releasing the chimeras.

-Grrr… Growl!

Some among them had excellent combat capabilities, and some didn’t.

Either way, they were enough to buy him some time.

Amalgamations seemingly smashed together at someone’s grotesque will squirmed and screamed before her.

Ellen gave them a pitiful look.

Aaron Mede ran further into the basement.

If he was able to leave the area covered by the Antimagic Field, he could escape with Teleport.

He ran towards the secret exit of his underground laboratory.

“Kuaaaaaark!”

Ellen paused for a moment to look over the creatures.

-Swish!

"…"

Then she began to cut them down without hesitation.

* * *

With me was Sarkegaar in the form of a sparrow, and Eleris was hiding somewhere using invisibility magic.

I didn't know what would happen, so I just brought all the resources available except for Loyar with me. Aaron Mede was an alchemist, so I didn't know what he might end up doing.

We didn't enter using the front entrance.

"Is that the secret passage?"

- Yes, Your Highness.

Sarkegaar, who was sitting on my shoulder as a sparrow, spoke up.

It was seriously weird hearing that mysteriously dreary and dark voice coming from that bird when it chirped cutely.

What was up with that?

He was a being of great darkness, but he was in the shape of a sparrow.

The mansion was built in a remote area on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital, and the secret passage was in the middle of a forest even farther away.

If I looked carefully, I could make out something that seemed like an iron gate among some thick vines buried under some fallen leaves.

We would enter using that passage and capture Aaron Mede from inside the mansion before he could notice.

-The atmosphere around here is a bit weird. I feel like something is going on…

Just as Eleris, who was hiding using invisibility magic, was about to say something…

-*Creak…*

The iron gate, which shouldn't have moved, opened, and someone with quite a desperate expression jumped out of it.

"…?"

"!"

When he saw me just calmly standing outside, he looked so surprised that his heart might have even stopped for a bit.

"H-how did you…?!"

"…What?"

I didn't actually know what Aaron Mede looked like because I had never seen him before.

- This is Aaron Mede.

I only knew because Sarkegaar told me.

That bewildered middle-aged man seemed to be Aaron Mede.

"…Why did he leave like that?"

- I don't know.

While I didn't know how that happened, Aaron Mede was right in front of me.

Even Aaron Mede seemed to want to ask why I was there.

He seemed completely shocked when he saw me waiting for him at the exit of his secret passage and talking with what seemed like a sparrow. It was like he decided to just give up on thinking.

That bastard put his hand into his inner chest pocket.

“Fine…”

-*Baam!*

I thrust my fist into his stomach before he could try to pull something out.

“Kuhuuuuuuuuuuurg!”

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but fuck it.”

I grabbed the ragged guy lying on the floor by his hair.

“You have to take responsibility for what you did, don’t you think?”

“Kuh, hukhuk!”

He hadn’t killed us, but I would make him pay the price for trying.

A very high price.

Then…

-*Boom!*

Someone else popped out from the iron gate after roughly kicking it open.

“Huff… Huff…”

Ellen, breathing roughly, emerged out of it, splattered with flesh and blood. She appeared to be hurried, and her gaze went between Aaron Mede, whose hair I was holding, and me alternately.

“…Reinhardt?”

“…Why are you coming out of there as well?”

What the hell was going on?

Ellen, me, and even Aaron Mede…

Sarkegaar and Eleris weren't able to say anything either.

All people present seemed to be unable to understand the situation.

CHAPTER 257

I didn't know when and where it all started, but I witnessed the results. Ellen had attacked Aaron Mede and made him go for the secret entrance, but I caught him as I was about to enter.

However, that wasn't all.

Eleris already knew about Ellen, but Sarkegaar didn't.

She was holding Lament in her right hand, and Sarkegaar wouldn't be as ignorant as Loyar.

We needed to get Ellen out of there quickly before Sarkegaar managed to figure things out.

"Let's talk about this later."

"…Okay."

Taking action against Aaron Mede was my top priority.

I pulled off his robe and shook out the scrolls from its inner pockets.

He couldn't teleport through his own power, so I looked for his scrolls. While I didn't know the details, I heard the rough story.

"You came here with Harriet?"

"Yes."

"Bring her here."

"It's dangerous. I'll stay here…"

"Bring her here."

Ellen looked at me silently after I used a commanding tone.

Her getting Harriet wasn't my ultimate objective.

I was sending her away because what I was going to say from that point on were things she shouldn't hear.

"Okay. Be careful."

Ellen went back through the secret passage, leaving me alone with Aaron Mede. Eris and Sarkegaar were still near me, of course, but she wasn't able to see them.

"Th-this is a misunderstanding. I… I don't know what this is about, but it's a misunderstanding."

Aaron Mede tried to say some bullshit about it being some mistake or something.

"So what if it's a misunderstanding?"

I laughed as I held him up by his collar.

"Whether you actually tried to kill me or not doesn't change the fact that you're a bastard who deserves to die."

Aaron Mede was something like a mad scientist, a certain criminal who deserved to die regardless of whether he was my would-be assassin or not. I made sure Ellen was far enough away.

If she were to hear any of what we were about to discuss, things would get annoying.

I also had something to ask him.

It was rather fortunate that Aaron Mede ran away so desperately.

Had he been stabbed by Ellen, he wouldn't have been able to give me an important piece of information.

"I don't really care about anything else, but I need you to tell me how to contact the Black Order."

“What…? Contact the Black Order?”

“Hurry up. If you don’t tell me by the time my friend comes back, I’ll kill you in the most painful way I can imagine.”

The Black Order…

Since I knew that magic was the most likely source of the Gate crisis, I needed to locate and figure out what the various magic societies were planning.

One of them could cause a terrible accident.

There were also some magic societies I hadn’t set up, so I could only investigate the ones I knew about.

Magic societies did show up in the original, but they weren’t treated as anything important, so I knew next to nothing about them.

The Black Order was the first one that came to mind.

Fortunately, I knew a little more about them than the other ones.

Aaron Mede was positively shocked that I was already waiting for him at his escape exit and even knew that he was part of the Black Order.

“Y-You… Who the hell are you?”

He began to think that I was someone far greater than he thought.

Well, he was right.

“You don’t have to know.”

I lifted him up by his collar and gave him a fishy smile.

“Do you think I’ll kill you? No, I won’t do that.”

I recalled one of the few facts I knew about the Black Order…

"If you don’t tell me, you won’t die by my hands. I’ll hand you over to Cantus Magna.”

They were the magic society known as ‘The Taboo Hunters’ to the public.

Their real name was Cantus Magna.

The Taboo Hunters, Cantus Magna, and the Black Order, which broke a lot of taboos…

They were eternal enemies.

He’d rather die than get handed over to Cantus Magna, and his complexion turned paler.

Normal people might know the term ‘Taboo Hunters’, but they wouldn’t know the name ‘Cantus Magna’.

The fact that I knew their name would be shocking enough.

As long as he was aware of the relationship between the Black Order and Cantus Manga, he’d think I was even stranger.

“If… if you let me go, I’ll let you contact the Black Order! I can introduce you to our members! I… I’ll do anything! You can even become a member of the Order if you want—!”

-*BAM!*

Like that, Aaron Mede’s head exploded with no warning whatsoever.

“…”

I stared blankly at the blood spurting from the headless corpse’s throat.

It was my first time seeing something like that.

I was really getting to see all sorts of things…

I could roughly tell what had happened.

I turned around and saw a wizard staring at me who was fully shrouded in a black robe.

I was expecting them to show up. No, I figured they'd observe the situation without showing themselves.

However, they intervened.

They wouldn't have minded if I didn't know about the Order, but I definitely mentioned it.

Eleris and Sarkegaar remained passive, but they were on high alert.

The person wearing the black robe was staring at me from the darkness of their hood.

"…"

"At least say something after suddenly showing up."

"…"

Although Aaron Mede was a member of the Order, he was a low-ranking one.

Even still, that person immediately disposed of him, and he probably had a high ranking.

I didn't know who they were, though.

"Hey, can't you talk? Why are you just staring at me?"

"Do you have any information on Cantus Magna?"

I smiled inwardly when that guy finally spoke.

I didn't actually believe that I could get in contact with the Black Order through Aaron Mede, but I knew that if I mentioned Cantus Magna in front of members of the Black Order, they would be the ones to contact me.

While I'd arranged the details rather arbitrarily, there were still things I knew, and that helped immensely.

The two magic societies hated each other to the core; destroying each other was

more important to them than anything else, so it was only natural that they would clutch at any information they could get on each other.

A young Temple student actually knew about Cantus Magna…

A normal person knew about a secret magic society whose name shouldn't even be known.

That alone made them contact me.

"Aren't deals about equal exchange? I can't tell you for free."

"…What do you want, boy?"

I looked at the hooded mage.

"Your knowledge."

The taboos…

The numerous forbidden arts the Black Order possessed…

They may have been the origin of the Gate Incident.

To prevent the Gate Incident, I had to walk on yet another tightrope.

He didn't seem to mind executing some petty underling. He appeared not because I threatened Aaron Mede but because I mentioned Cantus Magna.

"It has to be useful information for that, boy."

"Do you know enough to tell whether my information is useful or not?"

"…"

The Black Order were bad guys, but they weren't really bad guys.

They had their own principles that were just different from the world's principles, which was why he didn't react to my sarcastic remarks.

“We shall meet again in due time.”

“…In Temple?”

“That’s not difficult for us.”

Were those guys able to directly enter Temple? I was slowly realizing that I was getting involved with people I shouldn’t be touching. My skin stung due to all of the tension, but I had to do what had to be done.

“A boy who treats a Vampire Lord as his underling wouldn’t try to tell some pathetic lie.”

Of course, he was already aware of Eleris, who lay in waiting with invisibility magic cast on herself.

If that was the case, he might have already known about the talking sparrow as well.

Although I was completely unknown to him, he already had some strange kind of trust in me.

The wizard belonging to the Black Order disappeared like he had been nothing but an illusion.

The realization that I was really traversing dangerous waters made shivers run down my back.

I had to see things through to the end.

Even if I were to stumble and fall in the middle of it, I still had to pull through.

* * *

Ellen thought that I might be in danger, so she hurried back with Harriet.

The wizard of the Black Order had already left, and we had removed Aaron Mede’s corpse.

Harriet’s expression seemed very bad, perhaps due to the things she saw there.

“What did you do?”

“…Do I have to tell you?”

I pretended that I was trying to not use the words, “I killed him”, however, in fact, it wasn’t me who killed Aaron Mede.

Bloodstains left behind by Aaron Mede’s corpse were scattered all over the ground, so they could roughly guess what happened.

Harriet didn’t see the corpse, but she couldn’t find any words to express herself when she saw I had supposedly killed him without hesitation.

Rather than angry or afraid, she seemed sad.

About the fact that I had become that kind of person.

“Let’s talk about what happened later.”

I put off telling Ellen and Harriet why I was there alone and didn’t ask why they were there.

“I need to solve this problem first.”

We had killed a Temple teacher, so we had to figure out what we were going to do.

* * *

I sent Ellen and Harriet back first and told them that I would try to figure things out.

Both Ellen and Harriet seemed to have a lot of things they wanted to talk about with me, and they also seemed rather anxious, but I stayed stubborn. They couldn’t just force me to go back with them, after all.

I was actually pretty mad that those two were even there.

Back outside Aaron Mede’s mansion on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital, Eleris lifted her invisibility and Sarkegaar turned into something different, but it wasn’t the appearance of Count Argon Pontheus.

He looked just like an ordinary adult woman one could find anywhere.

It seemed like Eleris and Sarkegaar had a lot to say.

Eleris probably wanted to know why I wanted to contact the Black Order. Her attitude was rather cold because, no matter my intentions, it couldn't be anything good.

Sarkegaar was even worse.

"Your Highness, if my eyes weren't mistaken, I believe I saw that one of the two children helping you was holding Lament."

Of course, Sarkegaar was bound to ask about Ellen. Sarkegaar, who had always obeyed me and followed whatever I said, looked different.

His eyes were completely expressionless.

While he looked like an ordinary person, facing him felt incredibly terrifying.

That's a Dreadfiend, after all, they were demons that ruled over fear.

I couldn't come up with many explanations for Sarkegaar.

The Holy Sword of the Moon God, Lament, along with Alsbringer, was known to be the sword of Ragan Artorius.

He didn't use it during the Demon World War, so its whereabouts were unknown, and then Sarkegaar suddenly saw a girl with a lot of power for her age holding it.

Sarkegaar could probably make some speculations from that, and they would probably be pretty close to the truth.

Sarkegaar looked at me.

His glaring, which was void of expression with their whites exposed, made my hands and feet feel numb just by looking at them.

"Your Highness…"

“Even if you don’t tell me, I have many ways to find out.”

"Please, tell me everything now.”

What the ever-loyal Sarkegaar needed from me was neither money, praise, nor any other reward whatsoever.

He just needed me to have the will to rebuild the Demon Realm.

Sarkegaar would be willing to give his life for that alone, and without it, Sarkegaar would do anything to see me harbor such a will.

Ellen was in danger.

If I didn’t say anything, Sarkegaar would figure out on his own that Ellen was, in fact, Ellen Artorius.

Of course, the thing Sarkegaar hated the most in the world was Ragan Artorius—the warrior who’d killed the Demon King.

Artorius’s sister was slowly developing into a monster inside of Temple, so he wouldn’t be able to leave her alone.

If I didn’t talk right then, if I couldn’t convince Sarkegaar…

Ellen would die.

If Sarkegaar decided to kill Ellen, I wouldn't be able to stop him.

“Yes. That was Lament"

“…”

"The girl’s name is Ellen Artorius. She is Ragan Artorius’s younger sister.”

Sarkegaar’s eyes widened at my words.

“Why on earth does Your Highness share the bond of friendship with the blood of that damned hero?”

Not only did Sarkegaar's eyes turn bloodshot, but the color of his skin was turning blue and red.

Could he not control his form properly because of the excessive anger he felt? Eleris's hands were also shaking as if she was nervous.

She also felt rather suspicious of my intentions for contacting the Black Order.

Sarkegaar wanted war, Eleris wanted peace, and both of them were suspicious of me right then.

However, first, I had to convince the overexcited Sarkegaar.

He was furious at my failure to inform him about Ellen and that we were close enough that she was willing to risk her life for me.

Just one wrong word…

If I just said one wrong word, it would be Ellen's death. That might have been even worse than if he killed me.

Just like Eleris was on my side but still dangerous, Sarkegaar was also on my side, and he was also still dangerous.

I was feeling it first-hand.

"Isn't it obvious?"

"What's obvious?"

"She's the sister of Ragan Artorius, so why on earth shouldn't I get close to her?"

"…"

"Are you telling me that your desire to rebuild the Demon Realm stems from emotions such as base vengeance?"

Sarkegaar's expression didn't improve.

"Wasn't it you who told me to go to Temple to learn how to defeat the humans with

their own methods while using human weapons?"

"…"

'You should enter Temple and thoroughly learn the ways of the humans! Wouldn't it be truly satisfying to defeat them with their own weapons?!'

Sarkegaar was the first to suggest that I enter Temple.

In the end, wasn't it just an extension of that?

"Why are you so angry when the sister of the hero, who is sure to become the most powerful weapon of humanity, risked her life to save me?"

"…"

"The situation today wasn't what I planned, but I thought you'd be overjoyed upon seeing it."

Sarkegaar shook his head.

"You're using the flesh and blood of that damn hero… Is that what you're saying?"

"Right."

Sarkegaar watched me silently.

He took a step forward and brought his own face towards mine.

He was so close that the tip of his nose almost touched my own.

"Your Highness, you're a terrible liar."

"…"

Sarkegaar's sanpaku eyes seemed to look right through me.

"Did you really think I wouldn't realize how worried you are about her?"

I'd lost my composure at Ellen's sudden appearance.

I couldn't help but be genuinely shocked because it was completely unexpected. Sarkegaar had picked up on those things earlier.

Me using Ellen… Getting her on my side just to use her…

Sarkegaar couldn't believe those cold words from the start. Sarkegaar had already realized just how important Ellen was to me through my reactions alone.

Just as Ellen valued me, I also valued her.

He had already read me.

I was looking straight into Sarkegaar's eyes.

I was afraid, but I couldn't back down.

"So what if I do?"

"…What?"

Sarkegaar was rather shocked by my confident words, and even Eleris seemed surprised because she didn't expect me to say something like that.

"Was it Ragan Artorius who killed my father, or was it Ellen?"

"What?"

"Fuck, can't I just like humans? Is that such a big deal? Huh?"

At my sudden rant, Sarkegaar's eyes widened in a different way.

"Your Highness! Ragan Artorius is the mortal enemy of the previous Demon King. Even killing the seed of the Artorius clan wouldn't be enough. How can you treat someone of such a disgusting and filthy bloodline as precious? This shouldn't be!"

"I don't know, damn it. It's true that I planned on using her, and it's also true that she's important to me, so what do you want me to do about it?"

"Your Highness!"

“Oh, for fucks sake. Hey, are you supposed to yap on about what a Demon King should or shouldn’t do?”

“…”

Sarkegaar took a step back as I glared at him. Looking at him retreating backward, I shook my head.

“Hey, I can’t do it.”

“Wh-what do you mean by tha—”

“You should just become the next Demon King.”

“Pardon?”

“You just be the Demon King, you punk. Since you always tell me to just do this or that, why don’t you just become the Demon King, huh? What is it? Just do it, you bastard. Transform into an arcdemon and do it yourself, bitch.”

“Your Highness! You know that’s not what I intended! I don’t covet your position, nor can I!”

“Really?”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

I approached Sarkegaar, and as I got closer, he took a few steps back.

“Then shut up and do as I say. Do what I tell you to do. So what if I’m being nice and doing things you don’t understand? So what if I’m friends with the hero’s sister or whoever the fuck else I decide to associate with? What are you going to do about it? So what if you don’t get it?”

“…”

“I’m the only arcdemon. It doesn’t matter if my qualifications or intentions are questionable!” I said, pushing my face right in front of Sarkegaar’s.

“You have no other option but me.”

"…"

"Don't touch Ellen."

Sarkegaar's eyes were shaking.

"Don't do it if you don't want to receive an arcdemon's corpse. Do you get what I'm saying?"

I can always just kill myself.

I didn't want it to be like that.

I was threatening my underlings with my own life while Ellen wasn't there. I could clearly see Sarkegaar's eyes tinged in fear, anger, and sadness.

"Your Highness… No."

Eventually, tears flowed out of his passionate eyes.

"Does the girl know anything?"

"…"

"I don't understand, but even if you're able to accept her, she won't be able to accept you."

Sarkegaar's tears were, in the end, tears of genuine concern for me.

"Your Highness, this is… This is an extremely dangerous relationship you're having, and it's a gamble that you shouldn't take."

Sarkegaar cried and begged me to stop.

Eleris had said something similar. She hoped that our relationship won't come to a tragic end.

Just because I was able to treat the relative of my father's killer kindly didn't mean that Ellen would be able to accept the son of her brother's killer.

—We wouldn’t just be mere enemies.

While I was the flesh and blood of humanity's greatest enemy, I was also a seed that could lead to another Great War.

It was completely impossible for Ellen to accept me.

Sarkegaar’s tears, worries, anxiety, and words were all more than understandable; there was no way I couldn’t understand him.

However, while I could understand, I would never be able to accept it.

“Silence. I don’t care about anything else, but if you touch even the tips of Ellen’s hair, that’s the end.”

“…”

“That’s the only thing you have to keep in mind.”

“Your Highness… please.”

“Tell me you understand.”

“No, please. Just this… I don’t care about others, but this…”

“Say it.”

Sarkegaar sobbed and nodded.

“I understand… Your Highness.”

I couldn’t convince him, but I succeeded in subduing him at least.

CHAPTER 258

Rather than persuade Sarkegaar, I simply threatened him. I couldn't hide the fact that I valued Ellen, so I had no other choice but to threaten Sarkegaar with my own life on the line.

With that, he wouldn't be able to lay his hands on Ellen.

I didn't think he'd be willing to call my bluff, but the truth about Ellen had come to light.

Although Sarkegaar wouldn't do anything to her, he could still decide to monitor her without my notice.

Sarkegaar would keep a close eye on her. If Ellen happened to find out who I was and ended up trying to do anything to me, there was a good chance that he would make a move.

Eleris didn't ask me anything for the moment because the situation got a bit complicated.

Sarkegaar went back with both anxiety and fear in his heart, and so did Eleris.

That wasn't the end.

I was back to square one, and I had to somehow come up with an excuse for Aaron Mede's death.

To be honest, rather than me, it was Ellen and Harriet that caused it.

Those two actually ended up fighting him in his own house. Of course, it was also them who spread the Antimagic Field and chased after him.

It wasn't actually me who killed him, so I didn't have anything to confess.

However, I was a lot more reluctant to tell anyone that I had contact with a wizard of the Black Order. They would, of course, oppose the crazy things I was planning, and

they didn't even know that Aaron Mede was a member of the Black Order.

I felt a little strange when I heard how Ellen had gotten to that point.

It might have been possible to cover up Aaron Mede's death, but that would still leave Harriet and Ellen under scrutiny.

Since Aaron Mede died after those two went at Mr. Mustrang's recommendation, it was inevitable that people would notice the probable connection between Aaron Mede's death and those two's intervention.

If we couldn't hide it, then it would be best to reveal it.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, there were no living employees in Aaron Mede's mansion—they were all controlled by homunculi to begin with.

Ellen and Harriet went to Aaron Mede's mansion and saw a lot of inhumane experiments on various life forms being carried out, and that was why Aaron Mede tried to kill them, but the situation reversed.

I was going to explain it a bit like that.

"You want me to take care of it?"

"You're not asking me to do that, are you?"

Bertus smirked with his arms crossed at my request.

"Just when I was wondering what other big trouble you've been causing, now it has to do with chimeras and homunculi? Your life sure is eventful. It's certainly a bit annoying to get involved now."

"It's not my fault this time, okay? He tried to kill me."

"Regardless of whether you were in the right or not, this is a difficult problem to solve."

"…That's true."

In the end, only Bertus or Charlotte were capable of wrapping up the problem in

such a way. What I said wasn't far from the truth because Aaron Mede actually tried to kill Ellen and Harriet, not to even mention how he tried to kill me before that.

I thought about telling him about the Black Order, but I stopped myself from doing that. One could come to the conclusion that Aaron Mede was somehow involved with them just by looking at his underground lab.

"It sure is disgusting. I can't believe a Temple teacher was doing such things. Just what are wizards…?"

Bertus clicked his tongue in contempt. He seemed majorly annoyed that there were people like that among the teachers of Temple.

"It would have been taken care of even without you requesting this of me, so you should just stop worrying."

"What about the others?"

"You three won't even be investigated. There's nothing good about this incident getting revealed."

It wouldn't be good for Temple's image if the fact that one of their teachers was involved in many taboo experiments, human experiments being one of them, was revealed.

The incident would get covered up, Aaron Mede would just be considered a missing person, and all the problems involving him, including his assassination attempts, would just get buried with him.

Those in power would put it all to rest before it even reached them so that they could avoid a troublesome situation.

That, at least, seemed to be a constant in both worlds.

Regardless of my wishes, the case would disappear once and for all.

[Quest Complete - Assassination Threat]

[You acquired the characteristic 'Qi Sense'.]

With that, the assassination event that made my blood run cold for quite some time came to an end.

Characteristic : Qi sense

Description : A characteristic that lets you detect threats to the host—from small ones to life-threatening ones. It's an ability that supports you in battle and lets you detect killing intent at the same time. Risk factors can be sensed and identified in advance.

The feeling is abstract and not absolute.

Characteristic quests usually gave out great rewards, and the same rang true that time as well.

* * *

The incident was settled. No, it wasn't completely resolved yet, but I passed the task over to Bertus, so it would be taken care of on its own.

The stage of the incident was outside of the Imperial Capital, and there were no eyewitnesses because it happened inside the mansion, which meant there was nothing to worry about.

I just had to sort out the rest.

I heard all about how Ellen and Harriet found Aaron Mede, however, I only heard about it, and I hadn't organized the information yet.

I first went to look for Harriet.

She wasn't in the Magic Research Society's clubhouse or the magic research laboratory inside our dormitory, but she was in her own room.

"Hey."

"…"

Harriet looked pretty pale.

“Let’s talk.”

“Okay…”

Harriet carefully opened the door.

“Do you want to come in?”

Normally, she would never let me in, but she looked worse for wear.

She hadn’t actually killed anyone, but what she saw must have been horrifying.

Whatever she saw, it would have far exceeded her imagination. Just hearing about it was a lot different from seeing it with one’s own eyes.

Sitting across from each other at a table, Harriet was clearly only looking at the empty table.

Originally, I wanted to get angry at her and ask her why she did something so dangerous. Just as those two had a lot to say to me, I had a lot to say to them as well.

“Why… Would someone even make something like that?”

“…”

“There is no need for such things. A worm that can manipulate people, and beings made by mixing humans and beasts… Just why? Why would anyone need to make such things?”

Chimeras…

When Harriet saw the things Ellen had cut down, she seemed close to a mental breakdown.

She was appalled by the wizard’s twisted malice.

“Reinhardt…”

“Yeah.”

“This time, I know… that you didn’t mean to get involved in this…”

Harriet was shaking and carefully grabbed my hand.

“These things… These scary things… Could you not get involved in them anymore? I’m so scared… I can’t understand it… I don’t care about anything else… Fighting with the other students is fine, but… these kinds of things… can’t you just stay away from them?”

Harriet shivered before eventually bursting into tears.

“I… I’m afraid that you’re drifting too far away from me. No, I’m scared because it seems like you’re already too far gone…”

I was far too calm in the midst of that situation, and Harriet seemed to be afraid of that as well.

“I’d like that as well.”

Harriet’s hands were sweating as they held my own.

“I’ll try."

That was a lie.

They were words that could only be seen as a lie, and she also recognized them as such.

I had no other choice.

* * *

In the dormitory…

When I went to see Ellen in the training room, it was already midnight.

Harriet was able to clean up the bloodstains on us with her purifying magic, so we were able to return to Temple without arousing suspicion.

It was just Ellen and me in the training room. Ellen didn’t say anything and just

looked at me.

-Kachak

Ellen silently locked the door to the training room.

I had an inkling as to why she did that.

“Summon it.”

“…What?”

“Tiamata.”

-Chiing…

Ellen summoned Lament into her right hand.

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Ellen stared at me with her dark-blue eyes.

“Do it.”

I summoned Tiamata into my right hand.

Ellen jumped towards me, her body enveloped in blue flames.

-Pierce!

I tried to strengthen my body to its limits, but in just a matter of seconds, Tiamata escaped my grasp and Ellen’s Lament was placed against my neck.

It was an overwhelming difference in skill.

Did she want to show me that?

“…”

Ellen's eyes were seething with anger.

"I might have died without Harriet's help."

Even Ellen, in her magic-strengthened state, could have died inside that alchemist's house without Harriet's Antimagic Field. Ellen spoke calmly.

"You shouldn't have come."

Ellen, who didn't know that I was accompanied by Sarkegaar and Eleris, couldn't help but be angry.

-Kang!

Not knowing how to vent her anger, Ellen threw Lament to the floor of the training room.

The Holy Artifact rolled on the ground like a piece of trash.

"I told you not to do anything dangerous!" Ellen shouted.

"I… Just how many times… How many times did I tell you? I told you so often. Why?… Just why…? Why?"

Ellen trembled.

Tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"Why are you always doing these kinds of things… Why…?"

She thought I would have died if she and Harriet hadn't arrived first, and Ellen was right with that assumption.

If I had gone alone, I would have died.

Ellen was bound to feel frustrated because I couldn't tell her about my situation.

She couldn't help but think that I was a madman who couldn't control his desire for revenge.

Ellen wept as she held my hand.

“You should have taken that gray-haired aunty with you. Just why did you… Why did you go there all by yourself?”

It seemed like not taking Loyar with me was a mistake on my part.

Ellen felt like she was about to go crazy because I got involved in something dangerous. She had to feel like I was continuously crossing the line without even knowing where the line was.

It just seemed too much to bear for her.

“Are you angry?”

“Yes. I’m angry.”

Ellen looked at me, her eyes bloodshot.

“Then do you think I’m not angry?”

“…”

Just as Ellen had said…

Had it not been for Harriet, Ellen would have been killed in that alchemist’s mansion. She would have died without even getting to fight due to all of the magic traps.

Ellen was mistaken in thinking that I was the one who was lucky to still be alive.

It was Ellen…

Sarkegaar had found out about Ellen.

If I hadn’t threatened him with my life, Sarkegaar would have killed her right away, and she still wasn’t safe enough for me to not worry.

She was exposed to a long-term threat.

Just as Ellen was angry, so was I. I couldn’t even blame Ellen for it because she put

herself in danger for my sake.

Even still…

I could've done it all on my own.

Just why?

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Ellen coming out of the secret doorway of Aaron Mede's mansion.

Why is she there?

She's still alive, though.

How did she get there?

What if she dies like this?

Sarkegaar saw Ellen.

What should I do?

Just what should I do?

My rationality almost flew away because so many different thoughts were tangled up in my head.

However, I couldn't tell Ellen all that.

I couldn't tell her that she had exposed herself to danger and that she would be threatened in the future as well because of it.

"I'm stronger than you."

Ellen glared at me as she spoke.

"Does that mean that you can't die?"

"No, but I can protect myself far better than you can."

She was right.

But…

Even if I took Sarkegaar knowing about Ellen out of the equation, it was still true that Ellen and Harriet overdid it.

At that point, no matter how strong Ellen was, she was still below Loyar, and no matter how strong Harriet was, she was still inferior to Eleris.

They recklessly fought with their lives on the line without even completely knowing their opponent's capabilities.

I was pissed off.

I was more than capable of taking care of it, but they thought I shouldn't.

Someday, all of them might get thrown into the fiery pits of battle, so there was no need to go through those kinds of things beforehand.

However, a more fundamental question arose in my mind…

If Ellen became a Swordmaster and Harriet became an Archmage…

Would I be willing to let them risk their lives for me?

I didn't think so.

"I'm grateful that you said that you were willing to risk your life for me, but you really don't have to."

I had no other choice but to speak coldly.

"Do you want me to watch you die? You could have… told me what you were thinking at least. You could have told me what you were going to do. We could have talked about it, and then… we could have gone together…"

Ellen had no intention of backing down. It was something I couldn't talk to her about. I couldn't even tell Sarkegaar why I specifically named Aaron Mede as the culprit, so there was no way I could have convinced Ellen.

“Why didn’t you tell me anything?”

“…”

Just as I didn’t tell Ellen anything, Ellen went to investigate herself without telling me anything as well.

Ellen and I were the same, in the end.

We couldn’t tell each other because we were afraid that, if we told each other, neither of us would have let the other actually do it.

We didn’t tell each other because we thought the other would jump right into danger without knowing just how dangerous it was.

I could have lied by telling her that I wouldn’t do anything dangerous anymore, but she wouldn’t have believed me. Actually, I was about to get involved in something even more dangerous.

“I see, no matter what I say, it’s no use.”

Ellen looked as if she had given up.

She couldn’t convince me. I wouldn’t live like I did if simple words could shake my resolve.

“If you die, then I’ll die as well,” Ellen warned me.

“If you put your life in danger, that means you’ll also put mine in danger. Keep that in mind.”

Was she warning or threatening me?

It was a warning, maybe a threat, but in the end, it was nothing much.

They were just words that came and went.

However, wasn’t that what life was all about as well?

"That’s my line.”

I returned those words right back to her. Ellen stared at me. I wanted to have the last word, so she seemed angry in a different sense than before.

Ellen sent Lament back and picked up her training sword while throwing one toward me as well.

“Listen…”

Ellen pointed her training sword at me.

“If you’re planning on overdoing it with that weak body of yours, you should practice a lot more.”

Ellen’s provocation didn’t really work on me.

I was actually weak, after all.

“Yes.”

-Kakang!

Ellen rushed at me, and I parried her sword,

I saw many emotions swirling in Ellen’s eyes as she was scanning me to find any openings.

In the end, the practice that day didn’t go that well.

It wasn’t actually practice—it was just a fight.

-Ching!

“Kuhk!"

It seemed we realized that speaking anymore would just leave permanent scars on our hearts. It was something we couldn’t ever undo.

Rather than hurting each other’s hearts, we chose to break our bodies instead.

Of course, it was my body that got hurt more.

CHAPTER 259

I talked with both Harriet and Ellen, but that wasn't the end of it.

I had to explain to Eleris how I knew of the Black Order and Cantus Magna.

I acted as if those things were common knowledge when they weren't.

Sarkegaar had a problem with the Ellen situation, but he didn't seem to think that the Black Order posed any problem in particular. He might have assumed that I was trying to get new powers under my rule or something.

However, even though Sarkegaar was fine with it, Eleris wasn't.

While I was working in various directions, I suddenly decided to get in contact with the Black Order.

Wouldn't it be rather strange if she didn't think that I was planning on rebuilding the Demon Realm among other dangerous things?

Sarkegaar seemed rather reserved about the matter, so there was no need to explain myself to him.

As such, I first had to resolve the situation in which Eleris, who had been my greatest ally up until then, might become my greatest enemy.

The next day…

I left Temple and visited Eleris's semi-basement apartment.

The atmosphere around her was very different from usual.

She usually welcomed me with a bright expression, but she just stared at me with a firm look on her face.

If Eleris tried to kill me, I wouldn't be able to stop her.

“You look scary.”

“You Highness, who is trying to contact the Black Order and came to me on his own two feet, is speaking of fear? That fear can’t be real, then.”

“You really are scary.”

“…”

Eleris looked at me silently.

“I thought you’d bring Loyar or Sarkegaar. I can’t believe you actually came here alone…”

We were in a dark semi-basement.

While it wasn’t night yet, Eleris’s powers should have reached their peak. There was no way that Eleris, who was more than capable of killing me while the sun was still up, wouldn’t be able to kill me in that environment.

"Your Highness, you really are a strange man.”

Her pupils were shaking.

“You’re trying to hold hands with a dangerous organization such as the Black Order, and yet you try to protect this girl named Ellen with your life. I can’t say I understand what this all means.”

It seemed like she was unable to understand my actions in the least.

“Your Highness, no matter what you plan to do, I believe you have too much faith in me… You shouldn’t. If you dream of rebuilding the Demon Realm, you should stay far away from me. Even if you aren’t creating some grand scheme to rebuild that place, you still place far too much trust in me. Why… Why do you believe in me so much? You don’t even know me that well.”

Eleris spoke as if pleading with me. It seemed as if tears were about to pour out of her eyes at any moment.

There had been some friction between me and Sarkegaar, but he would never be able

to kill me. In the end, he had no other choice but to follow my will, so even if it was difficult for him to tolerate Ellen's presence, he wouldn't be able to lay hands on her right away.

However, that wasn't the case for Eleris.

Eleris kept feeling suspicious that I might dream of starting another war and rebuilding the Demon Realm.

She was a difficult subordinate to deal with—a subordinate who would kill me at any time if my intentions didn't align with her values.

There was no reason to keep such a subordinate close to me, and yet I had only favored her up until then; that was something Eleris couldn't understand.

The bond of trust I had with Eleris was damaged.

Since I was about to hold hands with a magic society, Eleris would never be able to believe that I wanted peace.

That was why she seemed so confused. Just when she was thinking about what to do with me, I appeared before her alone like I was asking to be killed by her.

When I fell into that world, I was mentally overwhelmed.

I felt relieved when I met Charlotte, but when I reached the Imperial Capital, I felt lost again.

I had met Eleris when I was worrying about the present and not even thinking about the future ahead of me.

I met someone who had to be on my side in that world filled with humans.

Was it similar to finding an oasis in a desert? Eleris and I meeting at that time seemed to me like a rope of salvation, so no matter what kind of being Eleris actually was, I had no other choice but to open my heart to her.

"I have never lied."

I stared at Eleris calmly.

“I’m not interested in rebuilding the Demon Realm or starting another war.”

Eleris looked doubtful. Yeah, I wouldn’t believe myself either.

It was too much to call myself a pacifist when I did all those things.

I already knew that would happen when I decided to take Eleris with me to Aaron Mede’s mansion.

It was an inevitable moment, after all.

Eleris would have to do something very important from then on.

“Would you believe me if I told you that I know the future?”

“…What?”

I was thinking about telling Eleris about the future.

* * *

Knowing the future…

Eleris seemed exceedingly perplexed as if she didn’t expect me to say something as silly as that, and she didn’t know how to react.

I wanted to tell the others as well, but I couldn’t.

To do that, I would have to explain too many other things, including things that I should never tell anyone, but I wanted to tell at least one person, and that person was Eleris.

To be exact, I wanted to get rid of that last bit of doubt Eleris carried in her heart.

I wanted Eleris to truly be on my side and stand next to me without having to doubt anything.

“Your Highness… What… J-just what are you talking about?”

“I don’t know everything about the future, but I do know some big events that will

happen in the future. I also can't predict in what way the future will change as a result of my actions."

It was difficult to go into more detail. I didn't actually believe and didn't want to say that I was kind of like the creator of the world.

I didn't have much knowledge of the place. It was like a house built by a different person on the ground I provided. I knew about the foundation, but the finished world was a place unfamiliar to me.

"The information about the Black Order and the Cantus Magna was just something I originally knew. You know that there was no way nor reason for me to find out these things."

"Your Highness… I don't know what you mean. Are you saying that you might be from the future?"

"Not really, but it's kind of similar."

The phrase "The more you talk, the worse it gets" was made for situations like that. Eleris seemed convinced that there was something wrong with my head.

"You don't have to believe me. I know it's unbelievable, but listen."

The story was simply far too long to answer all the questions Eleris might come up with one by one. Hearing my words, she fell silent.

"There isn't much I can use as proof. However, the thing is, in two years, the warp gates all over the continent will connect to another world, and many people will be killed during that incident."

"I named it 'The Gate Incident', but I don't really know what caused it. If things are left as-is, millions or even billions of humans will die."

"I was thinking that magic is the only thing that could have caused this, so that's why I'm trying to get a clue from the magic side of things. I'm trying to contact magic societies such as the Black Order and Cantus Magna because they might have caused it, or they might even have a solution for it."

"I'm expanding my forces now because, if things don't work out as I planned, we

might have to travel all over the continent to destroy all of the warp gates."

"Not only that but there are many ways to do it as well. If I think about it more, there are so many things I still would have to do."

"Yeah, I know it's hard to believe, and you are probably wondering why I know all of this."

"Now you can ask."

* * *

I didn't have much time.

Eleris had to move around for me. She could teleport, after all.

That was why she was the only one who could carry out the most important orders immediately and accurately.

Eleris might believe that I was actually out of my mind, telling the truth, or making up excuses, but she was silent for a very long time.

"Why are you suddenly telling me this…? I don't know what to do…"

In the end, Eleris still seemed to find it hard to believe me.

"Yeah, you don't have to believe me, but I hope you realize that I don't want a new war or the end of humanity."

The chances were higher that she wouldn't believe me.

With the Orbis Class gone, it was impossible to show her any definite proof inside of Temple, but there were still some things that would certainly happen in the future.

"Do you remember the club I made?"

"Yes, you created a club named the Magic Research Society and are even the president of it…"

"There will soon be some amazing things made there."

"…!"

Eleris knew of the Magic Research Society from me. She was very surprised at that time that I became the president of it even though I didn't know how to use magic.

She had already heard of the things I ordered to be made there. Like everyone else, Eleris was pretty negative about it.

That was why she told me about using magic with the surrounding atmospheric mana.

"No way…"

"Yeah, I knew they would end up making those items. That's why I made them create them in advance."

Power cartridges and moonshine…

If those two items were to be made by the hands of those students, Eleris would probably have a bit more faith in my words about knowing the future.

"I have no clue what will happen in the end because the future surely changed a lot due to my actions…"

Another definite future event…

"Alsbringer will choose his new master soon. Its master will be my classmate, Ludwig."

The next owner of Ragan Artorius's Alsbringer would be Ludwig.

Eleris heard the name 'Ludwig' leave my mouth for the first time.

"You mean… It's not Ellen?"

"Yeah."

Eleris, who knew Ellen's true identity, couldn't believe that the next master of Alsbringer, which should have obviously been her, wasn't actually Ellen.

“You’ll find out whether I really know the future or not when it’s time.”

She might not have believed me for the moment, but Eleris would eventually have no other choice but to admit that my predictions were gradually coming true.

It seemed like she felt that I was telling the truth—or at least not lying—from my weird confidence.

"I don’t know if you received an oracle or something, but… I just can’t believe it all…”

“Of course, I anticipated that you would react like that, so I haven’t told you anything up until now. You would have just treated me like a crazy person.”

“…”

I didn’t know when the future I talked about would come true, but Eleris would wait to confirm if what I had said was true.

In other words, until then, she would at least be my ally.

“You telling me this… means you have a role that you want me to play.”

Eleris looked at me, her eyes filled with determination as if she had made up her mind.

Eleris seemed determined not to turn her back to me, even asking me what she could do.

“Don’t get me wrong and just listen, okay?”

“Yes.”

I was about to tell her the important point.

“We need to rebuild the Demon Realm.”

“…What?!"

Eleris let out a shrill voice.

Before, I said that I didn't wish to rebuild the Demon Realm, but then I said that I wanted to rebuild it, so Eleris was very shocked.

That was beyond saying that I brought our conversation right back to square one. After Eleris looked surprised for a moment, she looked at me with a straight face.

She looked as if she thought that I said all those words just to end up talking about that again.

"To be precise, rather than actually doing it, we should make the humans believe that the Demon Realm has been rebuilt."

"What do you mean by this…? I don't understand."

"If there are rumors that the Demon Realm had been rebuilt now that Ragan Artorius is dead, the humans would panic, right?"

"…Yes."

The little senior, Redina, had reacted like that the other day.

Since Artorius was dead, who the hell would kill the Demon King again if he resurrected?

Fear of the Demon King…

If the Demon King returned in the absence of Artorius, the only one who could truly rival him…

The humans would fall into panic.

"We don't have much time. Only two, no, not even two years."

The gate incident would happen at the start of the third year's first semester.

There was only one year left, not two.

"If we don't manage to eliminate the cause of the Gate Crisis in the given time, we should go ahead and smash all the warp gates on the continent as the next best solution. Something else might happen because of that, but that's what we should go

with for now."

"…I can't do something like that."

"Right."

It was impossible to destroy all the warp gates scattered all over the continent at the same time unless I suddenly turned into the Empire itself.

That was impossible, but it was possible for me to become the Empire's enemy.

Being someone's enemy meant that one had a certain amount of influence over that someone.

"What would happen if we made them believe that the Demon King's forces invaded the Human Realm through the warp gates?"

Eleris's eyes widened when she heard those words.

"They would… block the warp gates themselves… Is that what you mean?"

"Even if they don't end up destroying them, they will place enough defensive forces around them."

I wouldn't solve everything, but the initial damage would be significantly reduced.

"This is just insurance. Just in case. We don't really have to rebuild the Demon Realm. It's just to make people nervous. That's enough to make humans feel the need to move. Whether it's me or someone else, it just has to be rumored that we'll attack the Human Realm through the Warp Gates."

It wouldn't actually be demons that would come out, but monsters of another world, but that's fine—the humans would be prepared.

That was my insurance in case I ended up not being able to get anything done. The humans had to believe that the Demon Realm was being reconstructed and become afraid.

Eleris looked at me with a stern expression.

“That role… Are you saying that you want me to play it?”

“Yes.”

Sarkegaar and Loyar had other important work to do.

Eleris didn’t have any particular job to undertake. In addition, because she was a wizard, she was able to move all over the continent in an instant, so her mobility was incomparable to anyone else’s.

The reconstruction of the Demon Realm had to be entrusted to the one who least wished for it. Of course, it wouldn’t actually be a reconstruction, it was just a bluff.

I felt like I knew that Eleris would somehow agree to it.

“…Yes, Your Highness.”

Eleris also knew.

Her expression told me that she had accepted her inescapable fate.

“Your Highness, if all this… is a lie, however…”

If all of it was just a lie, was she going to kill me?”

“I’m… I'm going to be very sad.”

Even in that situation where she didn’t know whether she could trust me or not, Eleris seemed unable to choose to hate or harm me.

Eleris, the first person to recognize me in the Imperial Capital, seemed quite intent on killing me before.

Could that have been a misunderstanding?

Eleris seemed like someone who wouldn’t be able to bring herself to even slightly harm me.

The talk was roughly over, but there were still some important points left to discuss.

“By the way… How should we start if we want to rebuild the Demon Realm…?”

Rumors already spread throughout the Human Realm that the reconstruction of the Demon Realm had begun, but we also needed real power. It was absolutely necessary to subdue the forces of the different demon clans who still held power and bring them under my feet.

The first one on the chopping block would be…

“The Vampire Council.”

“…What?”

They weren’t even forces of the Demon Realm to begin with.

“Make them gather.”

I intended to get them first.

“If we lock the door and push the Holy Sword in their faces, they’ll probably be willing to make a blood oath or something.”

“!”

I wasn’t really sure if I was able to break those long-lived vampires’ pride, but wouldn’t it be possible to force them to open their closed-off hearts to me with the Holy Sword?

It was the strongest weapon in the world limited to only the undead, even Eleris feared Tiamata.

History proved that there was nothing like violence to open closed doors.

CHAPTER 260

subudai11 *translation start*

I am uncertain whether Eleris believes that I know the future.

Yet, I had no choice but to reveal the most crucial secret to Eleris, as she now must undertake the most important task. Time will prove the truth of my words.

Eleris seemed to accept, to some extent, that my desire to contact the mage conspirators and my many peculiarities stemmed from that knowledge. Therefore, discussing the finer details with Eleris became somewhat easier.

We must prevent an immense crisis looming in the future.

With such a grand premise laid out, there is no need to hold back our words.

However, the problem remains.

“…You don't know?"

"Well, not quite."

"Did you not claim to know the future?"

"I don't know everything, there's much more I'm unaware of."

"But, what do you expect to happen if you deceive the Black Order with lies!"

Eleris exclaimed, seemingly astounded.

Uh, well…

It feels as though I've caused trouble and am being scolded by my mother.

"What I know is that Aaron Mede is a member of the Black Order. It doesn't mean I know where to find them. I threw whatever I could at the situation because it seemed there would be no opportunity to engage with them if I missed it."

"Sigh… What should we do then? I assume you don't know much about Cantus Magna either?"

"That's true."

"Sigh…"

As I write, the problem that arises from the length of this story becomes apparent.

Long-term serialization challenges human memory and ability, inevitably causing issues. One might forget the breadcrumbs they've scattered or be unable to retrieve them due to growing complexity.

The mage conspirators are such 'unretrieved' breadcrumbs for me. I haven't forgotten them, but the matter seemed to become too vast, so I just… let it go.

It's the product of my irresponsibility.

The Black Order appeared once during Aaron Mede's arc and was mentioned regarding the Golden Huntresses, but that's all.

Though I described them with an impression of grandeur and had ideas in mind, they never appeared again. Smaller breadcrumbs were either absorbed or forgotten during the Gate incident.

I never spoke of what they did during the Gate incident either.

All that remains in my mind are the thoughts I had when I first conceived the mage conspirators.

Mage conspirators act and move according to their own standards, regardless of societal morals. This is true for the Black Order, Golden Huntresses, and Cantus Magna alike.

The Black Order made a single appearance.

Cantus Magna was only mentioned but never appeared.

In the end, it is my mess to clean, and I must uncover the information myself.

If the Gate incident stemmed from the mage conspirators, I must learn about them.

The problem now is that I pretended to possess enticing information on the Black Order when I had nothing of the sort.

Thus, Eleris is currently looking at me with pity.

"Um… I don't know much about Cantus Magna, but I do know how to meet them."

"Do you know of such a method?"

Ah.

But saying this might…

Earn me a severe scolding…

No, it isn't complicated; it's actually quite simple.

There's nothing better than this.

"They're the Golden Huntresses, right?"

"Yes."

"So, naturally, if we use a forbidden curse, they'll come, won't they?"

"…"

Eleris' expression turned icy. It reminded me of the times when Ellen would glare at me with a cold look.

Still, Ellen always maintained a stoic demeanor, which made it somewhat bearable. But when Eleris, who always

To summon the Golden Huntresses, one must employ the forbidden magic.

This statement is not incorrect!

"What am I to do with this burn?!"

Eleris eventually burst out and yanked my hair.

Snap!

"Ouch!"

"What have I done…!"

She then startled herself with her own action, stroking my head vigorously and apologizing profusely.

My proposal to use Golden Huntresses to summon Cantus Magna was, of course, rejected.

"Eleris, think about it calmly. If the Black Order finds out I lied, we will have to fight them anyway. Either way, we will inevitably clash with one of the two, right?"

"Silence!"

Eleris sighed, sputtering.

"There might be someone in the Council who knows something. Let's start by seeking clues there. Some families are deeply involved in the matter, after all."

"Really?"

"Vampires who have lived a long time inevitably become mages. There's nothing better than difficult studies to pass the time."

We decided to put the extremely dangerous method aside for now and seek clues from the Vampire Council.

Our course of action would be decided there. It was of utmost importance whether they could be placed in our hands.

—---

I instructed Eleris on the tasks to be carried out outside the Temple, while our daily lives continued within.

Though we had not yet prepared any clues for the Black Order, the likelihood of fighting them was very low. If need be, I could threaten to use Golden Huntresses to summon Cantus Magna. The Black Order would have their own reasons for not using that method.

Aaron Mede's case was resolved, and Eleris was the only one with whom I shared the secret.

The problem.

"…"

"You know, you two are rather obvious."

"What do you mean?"

As I was quietly eating breakfast, Riana glanced at Ellen and me while chewing on the end of her fork.

"Did you fight again?"

"No? What do you mean 'again'?"

"We didn't fight."

However, everyone's expressions read, "You fought."

"These two don't usually talk much, but it's clear when they've fought or not, right?"

Upon Riana's words, Adelia laughed and scratched her head, perhaps considering that the moment she spoke, I would snap.

After the previous incident, Ellen and I fell into an awkward silence, as though we had fought but not quite.

Ellen was angry with me, and I was angry with Ellen.

We were worried about each other, but the result was that we had a negative impact on one another.

What should I say?

Externally and internally, the Temple was filled with matters that made my head feel like it would explode.

Ellen was not the only problem. Riana turned to the person next to her and asked.

"And why are you like this lately?"

“…No, I'm fine."

Harriet, who had been nibbling on her breakfast, lowered her head with a gloomy expression.

Harriet had been suffering from something akin to PTSD due to the shocking scene she witnessed in Aaron Mede's mansion.

Harriet had not engaged in the fight directly. After she had spread the anti-magic field, Ellen took care of the rest.

However, she saw the humans who were controlled by Homunculus fall under the effects of her anti-magic spell.

Although it wasn't murder, Harriet seemed to view it as such.

Then there were the horrifying chimeras she saw in the underground workshop.

That must have been the direct cause of her trauma. I didn't enter the workshop, so I hadn't seen it, but Ellen seemed to think it was a sight she never wanted to recall.

It couldn't be helped.

—---

Upon the conclusion of our lesson, Ellen, Harriet, Liana, Adelia, and I exited the temple.

Ellen walked at some distance from me, while Harriet accompanied Adelia. Naturally, Liana and I took the lead, walking side by side.

"So, it seems the matter from before has been resolved?"

“…More or less."

Had it not been resolved, there would be no reason for me to follow her out. Liana was an odd one, seemingly possessing a keen intuition but also not at times.

"It seems that due to that incident, we've found ourselves in this situation…”

She likely suspected that trouble had occurred in some unknown place but refrained from asking about it. However, it was rather unexpected for us to end up flower-viewing.

Such pastimes held no interest for me. Considering Ellen and Adelia, they seemed to be immersed in magic, not having much to do with flowers. Of course, Harriet must have lived in a palace with a garden.

Ellen probably wasn't much different.

"Do you like flowers?"

At my question, Liana cocked her head to the side.

"Not particularly? I might care more if it were clothes."

It was clear that she was not particularly interested in the flowers themselves, but rather sought a change of pace.

For whom were we going on this flower-viewing trip?

—---

Irene Dahae.

In other words, the banks of the Han River in Seoul, named Royal Gradium.

I used to visit the area quite often when the Rotary Club was located here, but since

they moved, I had no reason to come.

Autumn flowers bloomed everywhere, attracting many people out for a stroll. It was a world after the death of the demon king—a peaceful world.

In this place, people viewed flowers without any worries.

We were one of them.

Everyone came to enjoy the flowers without much thought, and Liana was no exception.

However, since we were here, we walked along the path, admiring the flowers scattered all around.

Liana grabbed my arm and pointed to a certain type of flower spread throughout the area.

The most abundant flower.

"What kind of flower is that?"

"That's a cosmos."

“…Why do you know that?"

"Well… it's common knowledge."

How could she come for flower-viewing without knowing what a cosmos is?

But it seemed that not only Liana didn't know, as everyone else also cocked their heads. Their gazes toward me seemed to have changed.

Suddenly, I was thrust into a different world.

"You all didn't know either?"

At my question, Adelia scratched her cheek.

"It's not that we didn't know it was a cosmos…”

“…You're all surprised that I know about flowers."

Ellen, Harriet, Adelia, and Liana all nodded.

Well, then.

To think it would be astonishing for a person like me to know the names of even common flowers.

Good grief.

While I wasn't particularly interested, I knew a reasonable amount.

Of course, I had once memorized the names and meanings of various flowers to expand my vocabulary. It wasn't helpful when it came to writing, but it did help me remember the names of common flowers and the meanings of a few others.

"Hey, what's that one?"

"A chrysanthemum."

"And that?"

“…That's also a chrysanthemum."

"But the colors are different? The first one is white, and that one is yellow."

"You're kidding, right? Don't you know that a red rose and a white rose are both roses? Are you really that ignorant?"

"Ah, I see. They do look the same upon closer inspection."

Though it was hardly extraordinary knowledge,

In this world, there were many flowers whose origins I could not discern—whether they were unique to this realm or simply blooms unknown to me from my own world.

I could not know them all, of course. It was inevitable that there would be more that I did not recognize.

But as the sun began to set, the expressions of those around me grew strange.

It seemed as if they had witnessed a side of me entirely different from before.

"Ah, why do you all react this way? Is it so surprising that I know a bit about flowers?"

"Of course."

Liana spoke on behalf of the group.

"You are truly an enigma, the more we see of you."

In the end, it seemed my newfound aspect was not received unfavorably.

For some unknown reason, Harriet's face was flushed.

These fools, it seemed as though they had misunderstood something.

I decided to shift the atmosphere.

"However, I find this flower viewing to be rather peculiar."

"Why?"

Their faces showed curiosity as to what I would say next.

"Technically, flowers are the reproductive organs of plants, aren't they?"

More precisely, the pistils and stamens.

"Isn't it amusing that we gather to observe reproductive organs?"

"Ah…"

"…"

"…"

"As expected, you are a madman."

Successfully, I had lightened the mood.

—---

I could not say for certain whether the flower viewing truly changed our spirits. As everyone prepared to leave, Ellen held me back.

"Just a little."

“…Huh?"

Ellen signaled with her eyes.

"Stay a bit longer."

It was clear she wanted some time alone with me. The others seemed to accept this.

Perhaps because of the misunderstanding that we had fought, they believed we needed time to talk privately. Without protest, they left us alone.

The evening of autumn neared, the sun setting.

We sat side by side on the steps near the Irine River.

"…”

"…”

We had been angry with each other.

I would become involved in more dangerous affairs, most of which I could not share with Ellen, nor would I want to seek her help.

Because this matter was far too perilous.

Even the slightest knowledge of what I was to do would be detrimental to Ellen. If she knew, the problem would not be my involvement in danger, but the secrets she would uncover.

I could not fathom what would transpire after that.

I did not want to imagine it.

"It seems strange."

Ellen spoke softly.

"What does?"

"When someone is precious to you, you should speak kindly to them, treat them well, and do what you must."

"…"

"But when someone is too precious, it seems we only end up saying hurtful things and causing pain."

Ellen gazed quietly at the tranquil surface of the river, its waters reflecting the red glow of sunset.

"It's foolish."

"…It is."

For some reason, I threw a stone into the river. I watched as it created small ripples before sinking beneath the surface.

Beneath the burning autumn sunset.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. I'm sorry."

We apologized to each other.

Ellen leaned her head against me.

It had been a long time since we had done so.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"Arron Mede. You didn't kill him, did you?"

"…"

Ellen had known all along.

She had no choice but to know.

The lie surrounding Arron Mede's death—his head had exploded, a wound I could not have inflicted.

Although I had hidden the body, Ellen might have seen it.

"Yes."

Ellen did not pry further.

"When you become a Swordmaster, will you share your secrets with me?"

CHAPTER 261

It was not that Ellen and I had reconciled, for we had never truly quarreled in the first place.

We had exchanged some unknown wounds, and we had both apologized to one another, putting the matter to rest.

Yet, the issue of Harriet still remained.

That night, I invited Harriet to the Teatime Terrace, a place where Berthus and I would occasionally converse.

"It's alright. I'm getting better," Harriet forced a smile and responded to my question about her well-being. She had no choice but to overcome the ordeal. Witnessing a corpse was a different kind of horror than what she had experienced before.

"I just can't understand it. I don't see the reason for such a dreadful act."

Magic, by its very nature, makes the impossible possible. However, one could not fathom the reason for engaging in such bizarre deeds as the blending of races or the creation of life.

Though Harriet's complexion remained poor, she was gradually improving. Seemingly finding some stability, she sipped her tea.

"And Ellen?"

"We talked, more or less."

"I'm relieved."

Harriet smiled, a lonely expression on her face.

“…You said you fought a horde of zombies in the Darklands."

"Yes, we did."

"I'm struggling just from seeing such a thing, I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you and Ellen."

We had fought directly against the terrifying creatures, and Ellen had personally dealt with the chimera.

Harriet was struggling just from witnessing the aftermath of our battle.

I wanted to tell her that the nature of our struggles was different, but it seemed as if she was pondering her own frailty in this difficult moment.

"If it weren't for you, Ellen would have died."

“…All I did was use a single scroll."

"That doesn't mean what I said is wrong."

Harriet looked at me silently.

If Harriet hadn't been there, Ellen might have chosen not to fight at all. However, once the decision was made, Harriet's role was absolutely crucial.

Even if she thought her actions were insignificant, they provided decisive help.

"I'll try harder."

Harriet spoke, gazing out into the dark autumn night.

"You're already trying your best."

Harriet looked back at me.

"Even so, I can do better."

I couldn't quite tell when it started, but every one of Harriet's smiles seemed tinged with sadness.

"I'll stay here during the break."

Magic Research Club activities.

Harriet appeared to have decided not to return home, but instead to devote herself to her research there.

In Harriet's expression, a desire for strength was visible. Perhaps witnessing Ellen's fearless battle had evoked something within her.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who felt we were running out of time.

Could it be my influence?

Both Ellen and Harriet appeared restless.

—---

I must obtain information from the magic conspirators. Furthermore, if an unavoidable situation arises, I must make use of my status as the last Demon King.

Even if it is a mere pretense, I must walk the path of the next Demon King. A successor of the demon realm with no background is nothing more than easy prey, not a subject of caution.

People must know that the next Demon King exists.

For that, a minimum amount of power is necessary.

The Vampire Council.

Regardless of their will, I intend to place them under my control.

However, it is uncertain whether the old vampires, who fear the Holy Sword, will fear me as well.

The Lord Vampires seem to be almost all mages, and there is a possibility of obtaining clues about the magic conspirators from them.

The Black Order has decided to approach me, and I have agreed to provide them with information about Cantus Magna. Still, I do not expect them to approach me in the near future.

They may have destroyed Aaron Mede's head, but they would not kill me just

because I provided false information.

They already know I am an unusual individual who commands Lord Vampires as my minions.

There is no chance they would push me toward the empire. After all, it would appear as one villain pushing another.

Therefore, there is still time left before the Vampire Council is convened.

Final exams are approaching.

After the finals, there will be a festival, and after the festival, winter break will arrive.

The busier one is, the more difficult it is to feel the passing of the seasons, and I was no exception.

The short autumn was already fading away.

Not necessarily due to busyness, but because that is the nature of autumn and spring.

Just when you think they have arrived, the seasons are already fading away into the distance.

Sarak

The sound of stepping on fallen leaves echoed throughout the school grounds.

"What's this?"

I brushed a fallen elm leaf off Ellen's head. She was standing still, leaning against the entrance of the dormitory.

Oblivious to the large leaf that had settled on her head like a hat, Ellen stared intently at me.

To be precise, she was staring at the person next to me.

"Your expression always changes when you see my sister, doesn't it?"

“…What?"

She was glaring at Olivia Lanze.

"Do you have a problem with me?"

"No."

"Do you dislike me being in such a relationship with Reinhardt?"

"Ah, what are you even saying?! If you're going to talk nonsense, let's just go!"

I happened to run into Ellen in front of the dormitory while returning from an errand with Olivia Lanze. Olivia furrowed her brow, looking at Ellen who, for some reason, was sending a hostile gaze her way.

Lately, I've had business with Olivia, and we've encountered each other like this a few times.

Ellen and Olivia have a terrible relationship.

However, the fact that their relationship is bad implies that there is some sort of relationship between them.

Did they ever have such a connection? I'm not sure.

"If I were five years younger, you wouldn't have been able to stand by Reinhardt's side, you know? I could have taught him many things as well."

At Olivia's words, Ellen raised one corner of her mouth.

What's this?

I've never seen her make this expression before.

With a clear sneer, Ellen retorted, "It must be nice being older."

"Wh-what?! I'm only twenty-two, you know! I-I'm still young! I'm in my prime!"

"Anyway, you're older than both me and Reinhardt. By five years."

"W-what?! Reinhardt! Can I hit her?"

Seemingly defeated, Olivia looked at me, flustered.

“…Why are you asking for my permission?"

"Go ahead and try."

With confidence, Ellen tilted her head.

Ellen…

Why are you acting like this? You're not usually like this!

Olivia turned her head away, huffing.

"Hmph! I'm holding back because my sister doesn't like violence! You better remember that!"

Olivia stuck out her tongue and went into the dormitory.

That girl.

Everything about her is good. Really good.

But sometimes, she chooses to do things that make me really want to smack her.
Ellen watched Olivia walk away and then turned her gaze to me.

"Do you have to be close with that person?"

“…Why do you say that?"

"I hate her. That person."

Ellen was visibly angry.

"Why? What happened?"

"I don't know. I just hate her. She's annoying."

It was the first time Ellen had so openly expressed her emotions.

"Um… She has helped me a lot, and… I still need her for some unavoidable reasons…"

"…Is it important?"

"Yeah, extremely."

I knew it wouldn't be good for people to see Olivia Lanze getting close to me, but I couldn't help it this time because it was really necessary.

Ellen couldn't argue with the fact that it was unavoidable, but she still looked very uncomfortable.

"You should do something about it."

"What… should I do…"

"You're not acting decisively, so she keeps doing that."

Ellen's anger was now directed at me. Her cold gaze made me feel as if my body was freezing.

"Or do you like it when she does that?"

"No, not at all. I don't like it."

"It seems like you do. Pretending to dislike it."

"No! I don't! I really hate it!"

What is it about her…

Why is she scolding me like a boyfriend who can't manage his female friends?

I couldn't find the right words in this strange situation.

Who do you think you are?

If I were to utter anything remotely similar, it seemed like I'd either have my tongue

cut off or my throat slit.

She's really terrifying.

"Then, stop her."

"Uh… Yeah…"

In the end, I responded like a boyfriend who couldn't manage his female friends either.

—---

There was simply too much to do.

If everything related to the Gate were considered 'tasks,' then there were indeed far too many tasks to handle.

Dealing with the various problems arising from human relationships felt like it could make one's head split.

Consequently, academic pursuits, a student's primary responsibility, were pushed to the back burner.

If I placed last this time, it would be dangerous. So, I wouldn't deliberately end up last, but I was definitely in the lower ranks.

"So, please show some restraint."

"What's wrong with expressing affection?"

In the end, following Ellen's instructions to speak with Olivia led to Olivia pouting and grumbling with a "Hmph!"

"…Honestly, it seems like I made some sort of promise with my senior! I have no intention of marrying you!"

At my outburst, Olivia's mouth dropped open, and her face turned pale.

"R-really…?"

"Why are you panicking!"

Hadn't I been continuously stressing that, while I genuinely liked my senior, I had no interest in pursuing a romantic relationship?

"I thought… you were just playing hard to get…"

"Ah, I feel dizzy…"

"Well, if not now, maybe you'll grow to like me in the future?"

Olivia's dazzling smile made me feel as if I was losing my mind.

Words just didn't get through to her.

"Tsk, if you're going to use me like this and not even give me a break, you know how angry I can get, right? Then you'll have no idea how scary I can be."

Olivia had a point.

I couldn't say anything in response to her argument that, while I needed her and made use of her as I pleased, I couldn't handle this one issue.

Even now, I was making use of her.

"Do you like that kid so much that you'd glare at me like that?"

"That's not the problem."

"If it's not the problem, then what is?"

Olivia's expression suddenly hardened, and she seemed to want to say something but stopped herself.

"I'll say just one thing. Has that kid done anything wrong to me? No, there's nothing like that."

Olivia was serious now.

"But I don't like her. That's something I can't help. Don't tell me not to hate her, not to

harass her, and not to start a fight. You know that, right?"

With her lips slightly pursed, Olivia looked at me.

"The more you say things like that, the more I'll end up hating her for no reason."

-Bang!

With that, Olivia slammed the door shut with a loud noise.

Why must I endure such things?

Though it may be cringeworthy, if you think about it, all of this is being done to save the world.

Why must I experience these petty matters?

—---

"I detest that person as well."

Harriet nodded her head in agreement.

"Still… they say that before all this happened, she was an incredibly kind person…"

At Adelia's words, Liana shook her head.

"She's quite the… scoundrel, that sister."

"A scoundrel…?"

Adelia seemed taken aback by Liana's harsh description.

Om nom nom

Ellen, the instigator of this conversation and the one who suggested dining out, was voraciously consuming five different dishes. She seemed different than usual.

For some reason, she appeared to be eating aggressively as if to relieve stress and anger.

When Liana asked her about it, Ellen admitted that she didn't like a certain Olivia Lanze, who had been spending time with Reinhardt. At this moment, for the first time in her life, Ellen was backbiting about someone.

Harriet agreed, Adelia didn't know, and Liana called her a scoundrel.

"But, aren't Reinhardt and that Olivia well suited since he's a despicable fellow too?"

Ellen and Harriet stared at Liana upon hearing her innocent remark.

"Why? Am I wrong?"

"…"

"…"

"Li, Liana…"

"What?"

Liana de Grantz had a knack for being clueless in peculiar situations.

Liana, who wasn't very hungry, had ordered a cheese salad and was nibbling away at it.

"That sister is indeed oddly clingy. Reinhardt seems to dislike it too, but considering he doesn't shun her, he might be interested… Oh, why am I suddenly feeling so cold? Has it gotten that chilly?"

As Liana continued speaking nonchalantly, she shivered from a sudden chill. Of course, she didn't realize that it was due to Ellen's icy glare.

"It's quite annoying how she's aware of her beauty and shamelessly flaunts it. It's so distasteful."

No one at the table had anything to say about that.

Olivia Lanze.

Although the title of Eredian's saint had long vanished, her striking appearance

remained unchanged. Even Reinhardt, who showed his dislike, couldn't deny his occasional confusion or blushing when around her.

It was irritating to see her sticking to Reinhardt to an excessive degree.

Naturally, one would think, "she relies too much on her looks."

"So, what do you want to do about it?"

“…It's not that I want to do something about it. I just dislike her. She always picks a fight with me for no reason."

Ellen said this and focused on her meal.

Though Ellen always ate a lot, today's binge eating seemed to be driven by stress.

"Picking a fight with you?"

"Yes."

Olivia Lanze would pointlessly provoke Ellen whenever their paths crossed.

This had been happening for quite some time, not just recently.

Since the incident at the fundraising event, she had been needling Ellen every time they encountered each other.

As they lived in the same dormitory, they couldn't help but run into each other occasionally.

"Ah, hello? Reinhardt's friend?"

"Please take good care of our Reinhardt!"

"You shouldn't get too close to Reinhardt, you know why, right?"

"Oh my, you're actually quite pretty. Not as much as me, though."

"You're good at fighting, huh? But don't be too hard on our Reinhardt."

"Sorry, I can't have you as a rival."

"Oh, are you angry? Are you going to hit me? I'll tell Reinhardt. Are you okay with that?"

As Ellen thought about this, she gripped her fork tightly.

The more she thought about it.

The angrier she became.

Grrrrr

Everyone stared wide-eyed as the fork bent under her grip.

But in the end.

Ellen was not the type to take revenge, even when she disliked someone.

Neither was Harriet, who also disapproved of Olivia.

In Harriet's case, she used to be that way, but not anymore.

"Hmm… But that older sister is a bit ambiguous."

"What do you mean?"

At Adelia's question, Liana shrugged her shoulders.

"She must have entered with a major in divine power. But if she abandoned her faith, what will she graduate with? It would be strange to graduate with a major in divine power, right?"

At those words, everyone's expressions became peculiar.

"True."

Although they had no reason to worry about the graduation of an unlikable senior, everyone grew curious.

How on earth was Olivia Lanze planning to graduate?

"I don't know."

Ellen quickly finished off all five dishes she ordered, took a sip of water, and her eyes gleamed.

"If she keeps doing this, I won't hold back."

"Please, please… Restrain yourself, Ellen…"

Although Harriet secretly hoped Ellen would do something, she feared a dreadful incident might occur, and so she urged Ellen to hold back for the time being.

CHAPTER 262

The strained relationship between Ellen and Olivia was indeed a problem, but I was preoccupied with more pressing matters and did not have the luxury of fretting over their discord.

My head felt as if it would split open from the sheer number of issues I had stirred up, and though I couldn't address the subsequent problems, I had to at least be aware of them.

I had asked Sarkegaar to investigate matters concerning the Orvis Class, even though they had no direct connection to me.

The advice from the previous crisis had not been a trap.

Rather, it was a clue.

It informed me that my assassination had not been carried out by the very target of my suspicion, and that other ominous events were transpiring.

Late into the night, I faced Sarkegaar, who had come to visit me in my room.

Ever since the Aaron Mede incident, there had been no signs of Sarkegaar disobeying orders or engaging in any other mischievous activities.

However, there was a deep sadness in the eyes that looked upon me.

It seemed to stem from the fact that there was someone I cared about enough to risk my own life, and that this person was the sibling of the Iron Wall General.

Sarkegaar appeared to be tormented by the inability to do anything, despite the strong desire to help.

Nevertheless, Sarkegaar did not neglect the given tasks, nor did they mention Ellen's situation, knowing full well that it would only exacerbate my anxiety.

In any case.

Sarkegaar had been investigating the events following the closure of the Orvis Class.

More precisely, those events involving Oscar de Gradias.

"It's a revolution."

Upon hearing that simple piece of information, my mind seemed to freeze.

The Orvis Class, where one had to prove their worth based solely on their abilities, regardless of their status.

A place that instilled the belief that one could surpass all obstacles through sheer effort.

It would have been more peculiar if such individuals did not dream of a revolution.

"So, the abrupt actions that led to the closure of the class were a smokescreen, meant to prevent further investigation and the discovery of inconvenient truths."

"That seems to be the case."

They hadn't foolishly provoked the Royal Court but had done so deliberately.

All to conceal a truth that must not be revealed.

[Event Complete - Revolutionary Forces]

[You have acquired 300 Achievement Points.]

And with that, a forgotten event was completed.

Charlotte had deemed it strange that there were no revolutionary forces within the Temple. Although I hadn't been able to investigate her claim properly, I ended up learning about the true nature of the revolutionary forces in an unexpected place.

The Orvis Class was the revolutionary force, and not just a portion, but most of them.

The reason they did not attempt to assassinate or retaliate against me was that it was a critical time for them to minimize their movements, and taking such actions would be perilous.

"The Orvis Class appears to have been infiltrated by the revolutionary forces for quite some time."

They were the cradle of the revolution.

They must have been carefully selecting and secretly recruiting those who seemed to share their beliefs.

And when those individuals graduated?

While not on par with the Royal Class, the Orvis Class still produced significant talents.

Whether in the empire, successor states, or autonomous territories, they would hold important positions in organizations and posts that recognized their abilities.

"What is the scale?"

"It's hard to determine. I have only inferred this information from the conversations of confirmed members, as I haven't personally witnessed their gatherings."

The investigation time was short, so it was inevitable that we could not grasp the details.

"However, with the Orvis Class, the core talent cultivation institution of the republicans, now gone, it is clear that their actions will be expedited."

"Yes, it wasn't for nothing that Oscar was fond of them…"

Oscar de Gradias was undoubtedly a member of the revolutionary organization. He would be continuously providing the organization with information about the royal family.

He knew what would happen if a full-scale investigation into the Orvis Class were initiated.

In the original story, the revolutionary forces never appeared.

This means that they did exist, but they were all swallowed up in the chaos when the gate crisis erupted.

The revolutionary forces took control of the Orvis Class and nurtured republicans for a very long time.

Many of the individuals who supported the Orvis Class during the sponsorship event were likely republicans.

Where could they have spread to? Sarkegar spoke to me.

"Your Highness, utilize them."

I knew, of course, that Sarkegar would say this.

"Use them to cause chaos in the empire and then annihilate both the revolutionary forces and the empire."

Yes.

There is no better opportunity if I am to become the Demon King.

But I have no interest in that.

Chaos erupts in the empire due to the struggle between the revolutionary forces and the empire.

And then the gates explode.

…The perfect situation for the world to end.

Simply provoking a fight.

It was no different from pressing the button for world destruction.

How on earth did I deduce this?

The butterfly effect.

Now, my teeth chattered at the thought.

There is only one thing I need to do.

I will not think about the pros and cons of the revolution.

First, I must stop the revolution.

Isn't that what I should have been doing in the first place?

It was absurd.

Sarkegar thought this was a golden opportunity.

"Research more. Find out the exact size, location, and who the leaders are. You may even join their forces if necessary."

"Yes, Your Highness."

I must know their exact size in order to take action.

Unfortunately, I cannot follow Sarkegar's intentions.

Sarkegar, unaware of my thoughts, smiled with happiness.

The revolutionary forces certainly exist, and they are most likely large in scale.

But I couldn't recklessly touch them. If I started cutting off their branches carelessly, they would start a rebellion when cornered.

Then, the chaos would occur because I rushed in recklessly.

Although I didn't expect a single fight to bring about such a result, any action I take now would cause tremendous ripple effects.

I must be cautious.

For now, I had no choice but to entrust the gathering of information to Sarkegar.

It felt like I was considering how to handle a nuclear bomb that could explode if touched incorrectly.

Killing them all would be a terrible plan, regardless of whether it was possible or not.

The best course of action would be to postpone their uprising until at least the year after next. By then, the gate crisis would have either happened or not.

So, if the gate crisis is safely averted, do I have to watch the rebellion of the revolutionary forces with my own eyes?

Even if I successfully prevent the gate crisis, is the inevitable second battle of the civil war within the empire waiting for me? Where should I stand in that situation?

I felt like I was going mad.

The world is a minefield, no matter where I go.

-…

Before my eyes, it was clear that Sarkegar was delighted to find a method to unblock his nose without using his hands. I, on the other hand, was lost in thought, struggling with a headache-inducing dilemma.

This was the very epitome of people having different dreams in the same bed.

"Alright, off you go."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegar prepared to transform back into a sparrow.

As I watched the sparrow about to fly through the open window, a sudden thought crossed my mind.

Sarkegar would only be used by me.

In the end, without the will to rebuild the Demon Realm, I was destined to use him until the very end. While I have made many mistakes, a significant part of it is my exploitation of his blind loyalty.

"Sarkegar."

-Chirp?

Sarkegar looked back at me and tilted his head.

"Last time, I'm sorry."

-…

I couldn't do anything for him, and in the end, I would become a worse version of Ragan Artorius.

At my selfish apology, Sarkegar gazed at me quietly in his sparrow form.

-Your Highness.

"…"

-This one serves Your Highness, not an Archdemon.

Since there was no alternative to me as an Archdemon, he had no choice but to serve me, and that was the intention behind my words.

You serve me because there is no other Archdemon besides me.

That's what I ended up saying.

To that, Sarkegar told me that he served me because I was worthy, not because I was an Archdemon.

At that moment, I wished I could bite off the tongue that had spoken those words.

-Please keep that in mind.

It wasn't about loyalty to an Archdemon.

Did that mean he would serve me even if I weren't an Archdemon? Why? Did I have such worth?

-Since Your Highness decided to rescue the demon prisoners who were detained by humans, everything from a single strand of this one's hair to the last fragment of the soul belonged to Your Highness.

It wasn't because I was an Archdemon.

From that moment on, Sarkegar had recognized me as his ruler.

Seeing my guilt-ridden expression, Sarkegar tilted his head a few times as a sparrow.

-Your Highness, there is something else I need to tell you.

As if he had just remembered something he hadn't said before.

“…What is it?"

-It's a different matter. Isn't it strange that the royal family didn't notice this?

“…You're right."

Whether it was Berthus, Charlotte, or the Emperor.

It was indeed strange that the royal family had been unaware of this issue. Sarkegar's intelligence capabilities were exceptional, but it was still surprising that they hadn't recognized the problem at all.

I wondered if they knew but chose to ignore it, so I did some investigation on them as well.

"What did you find?"

I couldn't get specific details, but it seems there is a problem within the royal family.

"What kind of problem?"

-There are rumors that someone has died in the princess's palace.

“…What?"

There was a problem within the royal family.

It was one thing if it were something else, but this concerned the princess's palace.

Come to think of it……

I hadn't been able to focus on it because of the assassination attempt on me.

Charlotte had been commuting to school from the royal palace for some time now.

I had assumed it was just due to an increase in internal affairs, but Berthus was still staying in the dormitory.

In Charlotte's palace…

Did that mean the Emperor had failed to control the dispute over the succession of the throne?

What other situation was unfolding, or rather, had been unfolding?

In the midst of a complex situation, another intricate problem had been thrown into the mix.

The sparrow flew away, and I stood by the window, lost in thought about this issue for quite some time.

CHAPTER 263

The revolutionary forces were a problem, but another entirely unrelated issue had been thrown into the mix, leaving them uncertain as to which matter should take precedence.

Charlotte had been staying in the palace rather than the dormitory lately. But word had it that someone had died within the princess's quarters.

This information had been gathered by Sarkegaar during his espionage activities, and he said that most people would be unaware of this fact.

Did Berthus know of this?

Berthus shared only the integrated classes with them, but Charlotte also attended the psychic classes.

However, although I shared these classes, I was in the dark about what Charlotte did during them.

Where should the focus of the problem lie?

Was it an assassination attempt on Charlotte? Or was it an entirely different issue?

Charlotte could be seen.

However, I could not discern anything from her expression.

If I hadn't heard Sarkegaar's words, I would have thought that there was no problem concerning Charlotte.

Both Berthus and Charlotte were adept at managing their expressions, as natural as breathing. That's why I couldn't detect any worry, concern, or anxiety in Charlotte's expression.

On Wednesday.

After the psychic class had ended.

I caught hold of Charlotte, who was about to return to the palace after class.

If I hadn't known anything, I would have let it go, but now that I was aware of something, I couldn't let Charlotte go just like that.

"Yes, Reinhardt. What is it?"

As I casually approached her, Charlotte cocked her head inquisitively.

What's going on with you?

Isn't it dangerous?

Do you have nothing to say?

I didn't know how to initiate the conversation. If I knew it was dangerous, I wouldn't have any answer to the question of how I found out.

Before Charlotte's seemingly ordinary face, which betrayed no hint of their knowledge, I couldn't determine how to start the conversation.

So.

Although I had managed to grab Charlotte's attention, I was at a loss for words, simply staring at her face blankly.

Finally.

"Are you busy?"

I blurted out the question, sounding somewhat like a scheming individual.

Hearing these words, Charlotte's face took on a puzzled expression.

“…Pardon?"

"Are you busy?"

I didn't know.

At this point, just go for it!

Let's just pester her!

Charlotte smiled at the absurdity of my words.

"What if I'm not?"

"Keep me company."

“…Pardon?"

Charlotte's lips twitched as if she couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Um… uh… well…”

Flustered, Charlotte rolled her eyes and let out a short sigh. Then she offered a gentle smile.

“…I can spare a little time. As much as you need."

Her smile appeared even more clouded than usual.

—---

Sharing information about the revolutionary forces was a pressing issue, but even more urgent was ensuring Charlotte's safety. Although I was unsure, there seemed to be a high probability that Charlotte's life was in danger.

I didn't know what I could do about it, but I didn't want to remain ignorant. At the very least, I could talk to her. Charlotte may consider me her friend, but her existence is more special to me than just a friend.

She was the one who made me realize that I could risk my life for something, and her survival is the fruition of that realization. So, I wanted to protect her. The royal court was in turmoil over internal matters, and Charlotte was involved.

Due to this, the Orvis class failed to notice that they were actually involved in an

extremely dangerous situation that could lead to the collapse of the empire. Of course, this was also a misjudgment, and there was every chance they could become aware of it.

The rumor that Sarkagar heard about someone dying in the princess's palace could be false. However, I had an odd certainty that there would be some trouble. I gained this certainty from Charlotte's determined attitude as she led me after I asked her to play with me.

I couldn't bring up the main issue, nor could I find a way to do so. Charlotte took me out of the temple. I had asked her to play, and she seemed to be headed somewhere. What could she be planning to do?

I didn't know about Berthus, but Charlotte seemed to have no fear of going outside without an escort. I thought that the princess walking around in public could cause some inconvenience, but unlike our previous outing, Charlotte didn't wear a hood this time.

"Won't people recognize you and cause trouble?"

It's not like Charlotte's face was unknown.

She shrugged her shoulders and showed me a bracelet.

"I got a new artifact recently."

"What is it?"

"It has a perception hindrance spell on it. It doesn't make me invisible, but it makes my presence fainter, I suppose. I won't be noticeable unless someone deliberately tries to approach me."

If there were too many people who recognized her and it became troublesome, she could activate the magic on the bracelet. Of course, since I was accompanying her, I wouldn't be affected by the perception hindrance.

It seemed like a magical item that would be useful for a celebrity.

"So, let's go."

After activating the perception hindrance, Charlotte led me somewhere. Before returning to the palace, it seemed as if she thought she could take a brief walk with a classmate during her spare time.

As soon as we arrived, I couldn't help but lose my words.

"…"

"Why?"

"No, nothing!"

The place Charlotte had brought me to was the banks of the Irine River.

I had been here with my friends just a few days ago!

But I didn't mention that, fearing that Charlotte would be disappointed. She had made time for me, not knowing what was going on, and she would be disheartened if I revealed the truth.

I couldn't trample on the princess's consideration like that. Charlotte tilted her head as she looked at me.

"Don't you like flowers?"

“I like them! Oh, I like them very much!"

Charlotte glanced at me, a faint smile playing on her lips.

"You're lying. You like flowers? Even a passing dog would laugh."

"No, no, I might like them, really!"

Why did she have to dwell on that? Seeing my forced enthusiasm, Charlotte playfully tapped my arm.

"Why do you keep trying to please me?"

"…"

"We're friends, aren't we? Just be yourself."

With that, Charlotte walked ahead.

I knew her situation was serious, though I didn't know the details.

Charlotte's ability to maintain her composure was almost frighteningly thorough.

—---

Both of us were troubled in our own ways, but neither of us showed it.

And so, we acted as if we had simply come out to enjoy the flowers.

In reality, it wasn't much different.

Charlotte's reactions weren't very different from the others either. She was astonished when I recognized a few flowers and named them.

"What exactly do you think I am…?"

"You 'guys'?"

"No, never mind."

It was amusing how people were astonished even by the small amount of knowledge I possessed.

However, in some ways, Charlotte was different from the others.

Charlotte knew the names of all the flowers that grew wild. As she rattled off the names of flowers I had never heard of, I was taken aback.

"That's a dahlia."

"That one is a geranium."

"That's a petunia. Isn't it pretty? I like flowers that bloom all year round."

"That's a heliotrope."

"Quite a grand name."

"It smells lovely. Want to give it a sniff?"

"No, thank you."

The thought of flowers being the reproductive organs of plants came to mind, making me hesitate and step back.

Am I crazy?

Why am I thinking of such things at a time like this?

Charlotte is enjoying the scent of the flowers!

When we had visited before, no one paid any particular attention to the flowers. However, Charlotte stopped to admire some flowers, inhaling their fragrance and walking slowly.

"How do you know all this?"

"I like them."

Charlotte looked at me and smiled.

"When you like something, you naturally learn more about it. You want to know more."

"So you studied them?"

"No."

Charlotte tilted her head.

"It just comes naturally."

Her love for flowers had led her to learn about many different varieties without any formal study. Hearing her say this, Charlotte seemed a bit unfamiliar.

Even in that smiling visage.

One thing I could be sure of was that Charlotte was genuinely enjoying herself at the moment. She might not have come here with a joyful heart, but she was definitely enjoying herself in this very moment.

Charlotte always wore a perfect mask, and I couldn't see what expression lay hidden beneath it…

But I knew for certain that this bright, smiling expression of hers was not a mask.

Charlotte loved flowers.

I thought it was reasonable to like them, but seeing her 'liking them' made me feel strange.

It was a side of her I had never seen before.

"Wow… this one is really pretty. What's its name? It's not labeled."

Naturally, it seemed there were flowers she didn't know.

I wondered what the garden of the palace where Charlotte lived looked like.

Suddenly, I became curious.

I thought there must be a well-maintained garden with countless flowers blooming each season.

Where you go is important, but so is who you go with.

Though we had just been here a few days ago, watching Charlotte occasionally stop to gaze at the flowers made me feel as though I had never been here before.

I found myself quietly observing the flowers Charlotte was looking at.

I took a closer look at the landscapes I had merely passed by, naming the flowers I knew.

So, this is what this place was like.

Standing beside Charlotte, who enjoyed looking at flowers, I didn't know how to

appreciate them and could only add a few comments.

Not disturbing her was enough.

"Hmm… the pansies are already in bloom."

Charlotte crouched down in front of the flowers I knew as well.

As Charlotte knew flowers so well.

Would she know other things too?

Fortunately, I knew this flower too.

It seemed that what Charlotte said about flowers wasn't very different from the original world.

"Do you know their language?"

"The language of flowers?"

"Isn't there something like that? For each flower."

"Oh, right."

However, separate from her answer, Charlotte shook her head.

"I don't really like that."

"Why?"

"It's just a label someone else put on them."

Charlotte gently tapped the wide petals of the pansy with her fingertip.

"A rose might symbolize love, but to someone else, it could mean sorrow."

Flowers are better when they hold unique meanings for everyone.

That's why she disliked the language of flowers.

That seemed to be Charlotte's way of thinking. As she gazed at the pansy, she appeared to ponder for a moment before picking up a fallen blossom. It was a flower left discarded, seemingly broken off by someone who didn't take it with them.

"Do you know the language of the pansy?"

"As if I would know that."

"Actually, at Reinhardt's level, you've already passed. I would've been surprised if you knew this as well."

Charlotte looked up at me, holding the flower in her hand.

"Do you want it? Would you consider it trash?"

"Even trash becomes a gift if you give it to me."

"You have a talent for saying touching words without moving the listener at all. That's a skill too."

With those words, Charlotte handed me a single pansy.

I didn't know what label she had attached to the pansy in her heart.

If I had told her I knew the language of the pansy, she wouldn't have given it to me.

I lied to Charlotte.

Once.

There was a time when I had pointlessly memorized flowers and their meanings.

I couldn't memorize them all, but there were some that I did learn.

Pansy.

Its meaning: please think of me.

CHAPTER 264

In truth, flowers are an exceedingly inconvenient gift.

Unable to tuck them into my pocket, I carried a single bloom with me. Upon seeing this, Charlotte simply told me to discard it. Whether she found it pitiful or had some other reason, I could not tell.

I really threw the hand fan Charlotte had given me amongst the flowers.

"Wow… You actually threw it away."

Charlotte seemed somewhat flustered.

“…Didn't you say to throw it away?"

"What, so the gift I gave you is just trash?"

"I merely prioritized the princess's command."

“…Really, why do people act like this?"

"Do you feel upset? If you're upset, just carry it with you again."

"You know, Reinhardt, the moment you threw it away after I told you to, it was already over."

"I made a mistake."

"Could you at least recognize that it's better for you to not say anything in situations like this? And I hate it even more when I tell you to throw it away, and then you actually do and say things like this."

"…”

"At least respond!"

"Yes."

Charlotte shook her head wearily, as if exhausted.

There was another reason why I threw it away, but I did not say it.

As Charlotte could not tell me the reason she gave me the hand fan, it was just like that.

No passersby recognized Charlotte, perhaps due to the memory inhibition magic.

I first met Charlotte at the beginning of this year. However, it felt like a distant, long-lost memory.

A girl dying in a prison cell.

I did not know who Charlotte was. Only later did I find out that she was a princess, which complicated matters, but in the end, I was able to arrive at the imperial capital because of that.

If I had not met Charlotte, would I have been able to safely escape the demon realm?

If I had not come to the imperial capital, what would have become of me?

Though it's pointless to speculate, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by what might have happened.

I might have lived as a nobody or wandered in the wasteland until I died. That vague thought was all that crossed my mind.

All of this began with meeting Charlotte in that prison cell.

Charlotte is my beginning.

“…Your eyes look like those of an old man. What on earth are you thinking while looking at me?"

"I-I never!"

Charlotte's expression soured, as if she found my gaze unpleasant. While admiring

the flowers, she spoke as we walked.

"You've always been strange, but lately, you seem even stranger."

“…What is it?"

"It's like you're teetering on the edge, filled with anxiety and impatience."

I am not like Charlotte.

I cannot manage my expressions. So when something is bothering me, the others notice and try to help me feel better, even if it's just a change of mood.

"I don't know what's making you so anxious, but why not try to relax your shoulders a bit?"

Charlotte is worried about me.

Even when she has her own problems to deal with, she thinks of me.

Is this really the time for me to be concerned?

You have your own issues, after all.

I was torn between the urge to ask her about it and the feeling that I shouldn't say anything.

"Since I told you to relax, why are you getting even more tense?"

Charlotte heaved a deep sigh. She was walking slightly ahead of me. As classes had just ended not long ago, the sun had not yet set.

Charlotte's platinum blonde hair dazzled in the autumn sunlight.

She had regained her health from her previous frail state. It was only natural, but this appearance suited her far better.

"Whoa!"

While admiring the flowers, Charlotte suddenly startled and instinctively grabbed

my arm.

"What, what's wrong? Why are you doing this?"

"A bee, it's because of the bee. Phew…”

-Buzz

Charlotte's sudden surprise was due to a bee.

It wasn't even a wasp, but a honeybee. The honeybee flitted amongst the flowers and then vanished.

"I thought something big happened…”

"What! Really, sometimes I think you completely forget. I grew up so gracefully, you know?"

Charlotte frowned upon seeing my reaction.

She had indeed grown up gracefully.

It was an excessive modesty for her to say so. The mere fact that a princess said, "I grew up gracefully," was already adorable.

She had grown up exceedingly gracefully, though she had faced some harsh experiences.

"But if you like flowers, why are you afraid of bees?"

If you like flowers, isn't it natural to encounter bees?

“…I don't have those in my garden, okay?"

Could the palace garden be managed at such a level?

Nonetheless, compared to the hardships she had faced, wasn't a bee nothing more than a speck of dust on her foot? Charlotte stuck out her tongue.

"Really, I can see right through you. Bees are an unknown fear to me. I've never been

stung in my life, regardless of what I've been through. It's natural to be afraid of the unknown, understood?"

"I get that you're talkative."

"You really don't spare any words for a princess, do you?"

Charlotte burst into laughter, seemingly in disbelief.

Though she said that, she seemed to be in a good mood.

Charlotte loved flowers.

But she was afraid of bees.

I learned that once again. Seeing the presence of bees amongst the beautiful flowers along the riverside, Charlotte kept a slight distance from the flowers.

Charlotte must have grown up in a garden with only butterflies.

I sometimes forget how precious her upbringing was, but I'm reminded at times like this.

Charlotte, unable to approach the flowers she loved due to the bees, laughed without energy.

"Reinhardt, have you ever been stung by a bee?"

"I have, yes."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"It hurts quite a bit."

"That much?"

Charlotte widened her eyes and stared at me.

"It's not enough to kill you. It hurts for a short while, that's all."

There could be cases of anaphylaxis or similar shocks, which would be dangerous, but otherwise, it was just pain.

"Should I try getting stung?"

Charlotte said so and attempted to approach the flowers nearby.

"Is there any need for such antics?"

"Is there?"

Charlotte scratched her cheek and grinned a bit foolishly. She watched the honeybees buzzing among the flowers from a safe distance.

"Unknown things are frightening, aren't they?"

“…They are."

Although there is fear in knowledge, the unknown is equally terrifying.

Charlotte keeps her distance from the bees out of fear of the unknown. She makes sure not to get too close.

Charlotte is afraid of something.

"Reinhardt."

“…Yes?"

"Thank you for playing with me today."

Charlotte's words were strange.

I was the one who asked Charlotte to play.

Charlotte agreed to spend time with me, but she didn't ask me to spend time with her. I was the one who clung to her first.

Did Charlotte actually want to spend time like this?

Charlotte gazed at me with a pleased smile.

"I should be going now. If I return too late, there will be an uproar at the palace. I live in a place with surprisingly strict rules, you know. I've been busy lately too."

Charlotte said, waving her hand.

"The palace route is that way, so I'll go that way."

"Ah… Yes."

If she were to head to the palace, she would have to go in that direction, and there was no reason for me to accompany her to the temple.

Though it was abrupt, it wasn't strange. If Charlotte returned late, there would indeed be a commotion.

However.

In the end, I couldn't say anything.

I didn't ask her anything.

In the end, all I got from Charlotte in this situation was a single flower with an ominous meaning that I could not accept.

"Goodbye, Reinhardt."

For some reason, Charlotte's words felt like a farewell.

I know nothing.

However.

A powerful conviction told me that if I let Charlotte go now, I would never see her again.

My intuition spoke.

If I let her go like this, today would be the last time I see Charlotte.

That's why I grabbed Charlotte's arm as she was heading back to the palace.

"Charlotte."

"Huh? Yes? Why?"

"Show me your home."

“…What?"

After asking her to play, now I wanted her to show me her home.

Why do I always have serious reasons that lead to bizarre actions?

As expected.

There was some resistance.

Visiting a friend's house is within the realm of possibility.

However, the situation was different when said friend was the emperor's daughter, and I was a commoner born from the mud.

"No. Absolutely not. Why are you suddenly like this?"

Charlotte did not get angry at my sudden request, but she firmly refused.

"I just want to see what kind of magnificent palace you live in."

My candid expression seemed to startle Charlotte.

"Why are you suddenly like this? Later, on a weekend or when we have time, I'll invite you."

"Today! It must be today! I am the type of person who must do things when they come to my mind! When I fought against the Orvis Class, I thought of it that day and took them down right away! You know that, right?"

"I know, but why are you suddenly like this…”

As anyone could predict, I threw a tantrum.

Charlotte looked at me as if she was losing her mind.

Maybe she thought it wouldn't work on me because I'm the type to act like a brat indiscriminately.

She said no several times, but finally, she sighed deeply and decided to take me with her.

I did force her, but it was surprising that she complied.

Has the commotion about the death subsided?

"Haah… Why am I…”

Of course, it wasn't an easy decision for her, so Charlotte glared at me with daggers in her eyes.

"Why the palace all of a sudden?"

"I told you. I want to see the amazing palace my friend lives in."

I, too, wouldn't want to be rude to a princess, no matter how close we are as friends.

However, I couldn't let Charlotte go just like that, even though I couldn't know anything and she didn't tell me anything.

Moreover, the new trait called intuition.

The strong premonition it sent was crucial.

I can't let Charlotte go today. If I do, I'll never see her again.

It wasn't exactly a revelation, but it felt similar.

I headed to the palace, knowing absolutely nothing about the revolutionary forces and that Charlotte was involved in another issue.

Am I courting disaster?

Or am I walking into disaster?

I hope this isn't the wrong choice.

Charlotte seemed anxious, but she was taking me to the palace.

The scale of the imperial palace is even larger than the temple.

It far exceeds the size of a district in Seoul, for comparison. Charlotte led me past the entrance of the palace.

Here, the princess's face was like an identification card, and I, a student of the temple, could enter the palace with the princess's approval and guarantee.

The security measures of the temple and the palace are the same.

So, there is no chance of my true identity being discovered. If my disguise with Sarkegaar's ring were to be detected, it would have been detected at the temple long ago.

Charlotte, seemingly giving up, didn't say anything about turning back.

"In the palace, I'll say that I brought you here forcibly. So, only act like a brat to me. If others know the truth, they'll obviously try to kill you."

Charlotte glared at me, and I grinned and nodded my head.

"Of course. I also act like this only when I know people well, you know?"

“…Please, Reinhardt. Sometimes, I really, sincerely dislike you, and now is one of those times. Isn't it something you shouldn't say to me, at least, since I am being lenient with your tantrums?"

"We’re friends, right?"

"Recognizing you as a friend might be one of the greatest mistakes of my life…”

Seeing Charlotte sigh, I chuckled.

"Well, at least it's not your only mistake."

"Be quiet. I really feel like I'm in a bad mood."

"Alright."

I quickly quieted down as Charlotte seemed genuinely serious. We boarded a waiting tram as soon as we passed the main gate of the Imperial Palace Emperatos.

"There's a tram here too?"

"Yes, because it's so vast."

It was a tram prepared upon the announcement of the princess's arrival.

We were the only passengers.

I pretended not to know, but I was aware.

Ludwig had been in the palace and had described it to me.

There are three tram lines within the palace.

A royal-exclusive line, a line for nobles and bureaucrats, and a line for everyone else.

We must have boarded the royal-exclusive line.

Unlike the tram at the Temple, there were no handrails for standing passengers, the interior design was luxurious, and there were fewer seats.

Nonetheless, without any annoying people recognizing the princess, Charlotte and I traveled around the palace like tourists on the tram.

I hadn't thought I'd be in the palace this morning.

The palace had a different feel from the Temple.

While the Temple was lively, as it was mostly filled with students, the palace was

solemn and quiet.

The passersby, whether they were nobles or bureaucrats, had stern expressions, clearly people of status.

Charlotte, having brought me here, also provided a tour.

"Do you see that? That's the Imperial Palace Tetra, where His Majesty the Emperor resides."

Beyond the vast garden and fountain, Charlotte pointed to the palace.

It was a solemn-looking palace, more austere than ostentatious. In terms of splendor, the Royal Class dormitory was even more magnificent.

However, the grand and imposing palace seemed to represent the authority of the empire.

There was no need for opulence.

It seemed to say as much.

The pride of being the undisputed ruler of the continent meant there was no need for adornment.

The descriptions in my mind became more intricately realized.

The tram circled around the central Imperial Palace Tetra.

"Do you know about the palace?"

"Of course."

I couldn't help but know.

Imperial Palace Emperatos

The Gladius Empire had invested great efforts in the construction of the palace while establishing the imperial capital.

Numerous magical barriers were laid out on the ley lines, and not only the walls but also the ley lines had hundreds of layers of intricate magical barriers to repel invasions and infiltration by impure forces.

"Surrounding the Imperial Palace Tetra, there are four main palaces in the cardinal directions. There are other palaces as well, but the largest ones, aside from the Imperial Palace, are those four. Starting from the north, they are called the Palace of Spring, Palace of Summer, Palace of Autumn, and Palace of Winter."

"I've heard of that."

"Do you know why they are named this way?"

"No, is there a reason?"

"Yes."

I knew, but seeing Charlotte enjoying herself while explaining, I just shook my head.

"In the early days of the empire, much attention was paid to the security of the Imperial Palace. That's why there were hundreds of layers of magical barriers."

"Really?"

"Yes. As a result, the ley lines became distorted, and the mana in the surrounding area became unbalanced, causing strange phenomena."

"And then?"

"The four seasons suddenly appeared simultaneously within the Imperial Palace."

“…Really?"

"Yes, really."

It was a side effect of the powerful magic applied. Excluding the center where the Imperial Palace stood, the four directions had the seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

"Of course, a lot of time has passed since then, and the phenomenon disappeared

after maintenance, but it seems they couldn't fix it for quite a while. So, the names of the palaces were not originally based on the seasons but eventually became the Palace of Spring, Palace of Summer, Palace of Autumn, and Palace of Winter, following the local seasons. Now even the Imperial Palace uses those names."

The tram continued to move, and as a palace came into view, Charlotte pointed it out.

"Over there is the 'Palace of Winter,' where Berthus lives."

It was a palace with a dignified posture. Hearing the name 'Palace of Winter' gave it a cold and eerie atmosphere.

Of course, it was much more pleasant than the High Castle Epiax.

The palace seemed lonely yet resilient, perhaps due to the person living there.

Berthus, who plotted from the Palace of Winter.

It seemed to suit him well.

Although the phenomenon of changing seasons had disappeared.

"Isn't it a bit of a shame?" Charlotte suddenly said.

"What is?"

"How nice it would have been if that Berthus shivered in the Winter Palace."

How should I react to such a sudden comment?

As I was taken aback, Charlotte covered her mouth and giggled.

"I'm just kidding. If that were the case, Berthus wouldn't have lived in the Winter Palace to begin with."

Although it was called the Palace of Winter, Berthus's Winter Palace was actually experiencing autumn.

However, there was a winter-like feeling even though it was autumn. The reason could be found not in the palace, but in the garden.

Had I not described this part?

The vast garden in front of the Palace of Winter.

There wasn't a single flower in sight. Although there were withering brown grass and shrubs, not a single flower could be found.

Strange.

I couldn't quite remember the description I had written long ago, but was Berthus's Winter Palace garden always so barren?

I didn't think I had described it that way.

I was certain there were flowers and flower beds in the description.

But why is it like that now?

Charlotte seemed to have sensed my confusion and spoke up.

"It's desolate, isn't it?"

"Well… yes, it is."

Should I say it's typical of Berthus?

It had a sense of order but wasn't ostentatious.

"It's absurd to have a garden without a single flower bed."

Charlotte crossed her arms and clicked her tongue.

"Isn't it childish? He removed all the flowers from his garden just because I like them. When I heard that, I wasn't angry, but rather dumbfounded."

Unexpectedly, Berthus had a childish side.

Charlotte loved flowers.

For Berthus, that was reason enough to hate them.

My memory wasn't wrong.

The reason there were no flowers in Berthus's garden was because Charlotte, who loved flowers, was still alive.

So in the original story, there were flowers in the Winter Palace's garden because Charlotte, who loved flowers, had died?

Since the reason to hate flowers had disappeared, it was okay to have flowers in his garden.

Is that what it was?

If Charlotte died, flowers would bloom in Berthus's garden.

It was both childish and eerie, revealing their mutual hatred and resentment towards each other.

This must have been a setting I wasn't aware of.

Charlotte grinned with a gloomy expression.

"You should have seen his face when I planted the uprooted flowers in my palace."

Berthus wasn't the only childish one.

Charlotte was equally childish.

"Ah, we've arrived."

The tram had reached the northern Imperial Palace.

"Over there is the 'Palace of Spring,' where I live."

The Palace of Spring.

Rather than the Palace of Spring, shouldn't it be called the Palace of Flowers?

The garden was filled with blooming flowers, giving me that impression.

Not long ago, someone died there.

In the Imperial Palace, where everyone should be safe.

And in a place that should be particularly secure, someone had died.

Instead of the blooming flowers in the garden, I was curious about what was hidden beneath them.

CHAPTER 265

In the well-tended gardens of the palace, flowers of unknown names abounded. Yet they did not appear disordered. If the Winter Palace's gardens evoked the feeling of a serene and orderly park, the Spring Palace's gardens seemed to be in the midst of a festival.

Berthus's garden was barren, but not untidy.

Charlotte's palace was ornate, but not chaotic.

A garden filled with flowers, and another devoid of even a single bloom.

I felt that these aspects ultimately spoke of the similarities between the two.

Charlotte, who loved flowers, and Berthus, who despised them.

Because Berthus detested flowers, Charlotte planted even more of them, even going so far as to take and plant the flowers Berthus had discarded, as if to defy him.

Both were fixated on each other's likes and dislikes.

What would become of Charlotte's garden if Berthus were to die?

With no reason to obsess over flowers any longer, the garden might not disappear, but it would certainly lose some of its current brilliance.

In this way, I realized they were truly similar.

Such thoughts crossed my mind.

Charlotte led the way through the garden brimming with flowers. The gardeners tending the flower beds paid their respects silently upon seeing the princess.

No special conversations took place.

There were no questions about the unexpected guest.

If the Winter Palace gave off a cold impression, the Spring Palace, whether due to its name or design, appeared comfortable and cozy.

Surrounded by vibrant flowers, the palace that exuded warmth rather than opulence seemed to compensate for its lack of grandeur.

The garden was a part of the palace.

I thought that this applied to both the Winter and Spring Palaces.

The Imperial Palace Tetra was no exception.

"Really no bees?"

“…Wow."

Charlotte's eyes widened at my words.

"The flowers are beautiful. They smell nice. They're well-tended. I didn't expect you to say that, but you were still thinking about it?"

Of course, I was!

With so many flowers, it was natural to expect bees, but as you said, there really were no bees in sight, which was astonishing!

"Of course not. If I got stung, the gardener's head would roll."

As Charlotte spoke with a laugh, I broke into a cold sweat.

There must be no bees in this garden, or they could not come here. The pest control must be quite effective.

"No, but then… what about… you know."

"Pollen transfer?"

"Yeah, that."

If there were no bees, the pollen transfer wouldn't happen, and wouldn't that be a

problem?

"You worry about strange things. They'll figure it out."

"How?"

“…Reinhardt, I don't know about such things."

Charlotte loved flowers, and thus, this vast garden of blossoms was created. There was no need or reason for her to know the specifics of what the gardeners had to do.

That was the nature of power.

Charlotte lived a life where such things were simply taken for granted.

No matter how I looked at it, Charlotte was a distant figure to me.

I don't need to know such things. The underlings will handle it.

How bold it was for her to say so.

Charlotte walked through the garden and arrived at the entrance of the palace. Inside, a grand hall, spiral staircase, statues, and columns awaited.

I couldn't help but think that the palace was far too vast for Charlotte to live in alone.

No, she would not live alone. There would be maids and servants, various personnel tasked with different duties, and an escort of soldiers.

However…

Somehow…

There were no servants to be seen in the grand hall.

Well, they could be seen, but…

There should have been people coming to greet Charlotte.

No one came to meet Charlotte, and there seemed to be very few people around.

Something must have happened here, and this quietness was a trace of that event.

Although Charlotte had forcibly brought me here, would there be no chance for me to see anything suspicious?

Charlotte was the first to speak in the cold palace.

"I told you before, don't make useless remarks. I will handle it."

"Yes."

I will keep that in mind.

It was as if Charlotte had admitted that she could rely on me.

What a pleasant feeling.

"Your Highness."

And then, a person who had been sitting somewhere in the hall stood up and came to greet Charlotte.

I couldn't help but widen my eyes at the sight of the approaching person.

He was alive.

The cavalry lieutenant who had provided crucial assistance when we escaped the Demonic Realm.

"Have you returned?"

"Ah, Dyrus. Say hello. This is my friend, Reinhardt. Reinhardt, say hello. This is Sir Dyrus, my escort knight."

Now Charlotte's escort knight, Dyrus, was standing before me.

—---

I had been guessing that Dyrus might be dead, and I couldn't ask Charlotte about it. There was no reason for me to know Dyrus.

He had become Charlotte's escort knight. Charlotte had managed to protect the person who had saved her in some way.

However, Dyrus's skills were not superhuman. I could not know what kind of development had taken place since then.

He was safe.

That's enough.

But contrary to my relief, Dyrus looked at me with a cautious gaze.

"Your Highness, bringing an outsider here is…"

"He's a friend."

"Even so…"

Despite Charlotte's words, Dyrus showed a troubled expression.

The rumors of what had happened here were likely true.

That's why the entry of outsiders is currently prohibited.

Charlotte was desperately trying to cover up my coercion with her own, and Dyrus looked troubled.

The princess who had brought a friend home against her friend's wishes was now making a fuss herself.

"Your Highness."

And then, cutting through Dyrus's voice, another familiar voice was heard.

It wasn't familiar to my ears, but it wasn't unfamiliar either.

"Your Highness, you should refrain from bringing outsiders here."

I had seen her before, the commander of the Empire's 1st Knights Division, Shanafel, Sabiolin Tana.

Why is she here?

She, dressed in the Knights Division uniform, was walking toward Charlotte and me.

"It hasn't been long, Reinhardt."

She, of course, recognized me.

"You ought to have been invited, but I'm sorry, I must ask you to leave."

She spoke as if Charlotte's opinion did not matter.

Has Shanafel been put in charge of the Spring Palace's security?

The effect of the rumors that Sarkegaar had mentioned was unfolding before my eyes in real-time.

What on earth had transpired?

Was Charlotte safe?

"Captain Tana, I am the one who makes that decision."

"Although temporary, I am the one responsible for the palace's safety."

Suddenly, a nerve-racking standoff unfolded between the world's strongest woman and the First Princess.

"Are you implying that Reinhardt is a dangerous person?"

"I believe you understand that's not what I'm saying."

I resolved to bluff, trusting my intuition, but was Charlotte engaging in an unnecessary battle because of my stubbornness?

Sabiolin Tana stared at me, as if to say, she had tolerated enough of Charlotte's persistence.

It would be better for me to take the hint and back off than to have her engage in a confrontation with the princess. The expression was as if to say, "You should know

when to leave on your own."

However, I could not retreat, even with the world's strongest woman before me.

I needed to find out what was happening to Charlotte here.

I had no intention of backing down.

Upon seeing me stare back defiantly, she turned her gaze back to Charlotte.

"Your Highness, let's talk for a moment."

Her tone was almost commanding.

Was this the extent of the authority and power that Sabiolin Tana possessed?

"Yes, Captain Tana."

Charlotte's spirit remained unbroken.

It was strange that both Dyrus and Sabiolin Tana opposed my visit.

Therefore, it was reasonable to think that this situation was exclusive to the Spring Palace.

Sabiolin Tana, Charlotte, and Dyrus went somewhere to talk privately.

They went far enough away that I couldn't hear their conversation.

There were no other knights in sight, except for the commander.

She seemed to be alone.

I couldn't tell whether the others were hidden and guarding someplace or what.

If a murder had occurred, shouldn't security be heightened?

Why was it so eerily quiet?

An ominous feeling crept in.

How much time had passed? When they returned, Sabiolin Tana appeared to be quite agitated.

I felt sorry for Charlotte.

Because of my unnecessary stubbornness, she had to engage in an unnecessary battle.

"Eat dinner and go. It's alright."

Charlotte said, smiling brightly, while the others remained silent.

I was amazed that my persistence worked.

It was a request that could barely be accommodated even in ordinary circumstances.

Yet, in this extraordinary situation, Charlotte granted my insistence.

"Shall we take a walk?"

As if offering to show me around, Charlotte led me through the quiet and desolate Spring Palace.

Neither Dyrus nor Tana followed us.

"What's really going on all of a sudden?… I didn't want to fight with Captain Tana."

"Did you fight?"

"Not exactly, but… Just know that I had to sacrifice my reputation to take care of you."

There seemed to be a slight chill in Charlotte's gaze. I wondered if I had caused trouble by relying solely on my intuition.

"Anyway, don't be rude to Captain Tana or Captain Dyrus. Got it?"

"Of course. I'm not crazy."

"Right. It would be strange now if you were."

Well.

I have a conscience, and I should admit what needs to be admitted.

"You're right. I might be crazy, but I'm not so insane as to mess with the commander of Shanafel. Don't worry."

"Then why are you messing with me?"

"Friend…”

"Shut up!"

Charlotte, as if she couldn't stand to hear it anymore, covered her ears.

"Shut up!"

The echo of Charlotte's shout filled the corridors of the Spring Palace, which was eerily silent.

"It's quiet here."

“…It wasn't always like this. We've reduced the number of people recently."

"Really?"

"Yes. Let's go."

Having brought me here, Charlotte seemed to have no intention of showing me around with enthusiasm, but she eagerly led the way. There were no signs of a murder. Even if there were, I wouldn't be able to recognize them, and there would be no reason for them to remain.

The first place Charlotte took me to was the gallery.

"Do you like paintings?"

“…I can't lie about this. I don't like them at all."

"Can I assume you have no interest in anything related to art in general?"

"That's right."

"Actually, neither do I."

Charlotte casually walked past the numerous paintings and sculptures hung in the large gallery within the palace.

"I don't understand it. Paintings are just inferior imitations of reality. They're simply lesser versions of reality, and their only function lies in their preservation, like taxidermy. But with the development of mnemonic magic, that function has become obsolete. Still, it's strange to see people still fussing over brushstrokes."

Charlotte could be quite cynical at times, incomparable to Berthus.

The value of painting, an imitation of reality, had plummeted with the development of magic similar to photography.

Abstract art seemed to be an unknown concept here. I learned an unexpected fact. While denying the potential of painting, Charlotte walked through the gallery filled with portraits.

"These are portraits of the people who lived in the Spring Palace. Some are royalty, others are not."

"Really? So, even non-royalty can live in the palace?"

"Yes."

Although it was only a confirmation of what I already knew, Charlotte eagerly explained.

Her earnest demeanor was quite endearing, so I pretended to be curious on purpose.

"The Summer Palace has the largest scale, with many subsidiary palaces. That's where the royal relatives have lived since ancient times. The Autumn Palace in the south is where the officials work."

I wonder who lived in the Spring Palace in the original work.

Although it was where Charlotte lived, she would not have been able to return, and

another master would have taken her place. I don't know about that. Berthus lived in the Winter Palace in the original work as well.

One cannot know what they don't know. The residences of the royal relatives might have expanded.

There were two potential heirs living in two of the four palaces.

Charlotte and Berthus, each the master of one of the palaces, and Oscar de Gradias residing in the eastern Summer Palace, the residence of the royal relatives.

Even if they were all royalty, Berthus's words about them being incomparable to one another now made sense.

After walking through the gallery, we visited the chapel next.

Though dust did not accumulate, the space felt as if it had been unused for a long time.

In the presence of the statues of the five gods, Charlotte looked at me.

"Do you have a god you follow?"

"Not really."

"I thought so."

Although I am Tiamata's master, I naturally have no god that I follow.

The religion of this world is peculiar. Rather, it has to be different.

There is no concept of not believing in gods.

There are gods.

However, the question is whether one follows that god.

Those who follow are considered religious. One cannot deny the existence of gods, for there is the divine power called godly force, and the divine artifacts bestowed by the gods.

"And you?"

"Me? Not really…"

Charlotte shook her head.

"Of course, if Artorius hadn't won, I would have died, so maybe I should serve the War God, Alse… I've thought about that."

Ragan Artorius was not a priest of Alse, but he did wield the divine artifact, Alsebringer, to defeat the Demon King.

"Even though I think Artorius saved me… it doesn't feel like it was just that…"

Charlotte smiled wistfully.

She must have been thinking about Valier. Was my existence such a great salvation for Charlotte? Of course, I did save her life, but if Artorius hadn't existed before that, the war wouldn't have ended.

"How strong must the Demon King have been? Even if Artorius had been defeated, couldn't the allied forces have killed the Demon King if they joined forces?"

"Well…"

I say this, but in fact, I know.

The former Demon King, Valier.

Although the novel begins with the death of the Demon King, how powerful was he?

If it wasn't for Ragan Artorius, the Demon King wouldn't have died.

The allied forces would have been defeated.

People know that Ragan Artorius killed the Demon King, but they don't know how he did it. The battle took place inside the Demon King's castle, with no audience to witness it.

That is something only I know in this world.

If it wasn't for Alsebringer, even Ragan Artorius wouldn't have been able to subdue the Demon King.

If Ragan Artorius hadn't been there, the Demon King would have won, and I wouldn't have had to flee. Charlotte would have died.

"How ridiculous… to think like this."

Charlotte and I, having left the chapel, continued to walk around the palace. There was a music room, but no musicians. The instrument storeroom next to it was also empty.

Charlotte introduced me to various places. Quarters for palace staff, kitchen, dining hall, dressing room, storeroom, and guest bedrooms.

Even more surprisingly.

"Is, is this alright?"

“…Every time I realize there's a limit to rudeness, I'm amazed. What's not alright? You've already been quite rude."

Charlotte even showed me her bedroom.

CHAPTER 266

Charlotte's bedroom was not so spacious as to allow for a game of football within its confines.

It featured an elegant canopy bed draped with silk curtains, a table for meetings, an armchair and sofa, as well as neatly arranged furnishings including bookshelves.

There was a dressing room within the bedroom, and it appeared to also have a large bathroom.

The royal-class dormitory was quite impressive, but it naturally could not compare to the princess's bedroom.

Suddenly, I became curious.

Did Charlotte dress herself, or did she have maids to help her? In the dormitory, she would have to do everything on her own.

Well, there might be some articles of clothing that were difficult to put on or take off without assistance. In such cases, she might need to borrow someone's hand.

Of course, I didn't ask.

As I surveyed the bedroom, I eventually blurted out my thoughts.

"The bed… It's enormous, isn't it?"

"Truly, your perspective is commendable," Charlotte said, seemingly expecting such a remark as she gestured to the gigantic bed that was more than twice the size of a king size.

It was not only wide but also unusually long.

"Yet, astonishingly, you are right. That bed is too vast. But I only realized how uncomfortable it was after using the dormitory bed."

The dormitory bed was large as well, but not to that extent.

Have you seen people living in rooms narrower than your bed? It's just slightly smaller than an average studio apartment.

"I always thought I had to crawl my way to the edge of the bed to get down. But in the dormitory bed, all I have to do is roll over once to the side?"

Charlotte's realization that she had been using an uncomfortable bed all her life, only after trying a smaller one, made me laugh.

Her expression was endearing.

Being able to get off the bed by rolling over once to the side was too delightful.

Imagining Charlotte doing that, the gravity of the current situation seemed to dissipate, and I almost burst into laughter.

"Do you want to lie down on it?"

"I know you think I'm crazy, but I'm not that far gone!"

I have some decency! Others may not agree, but I'm sure it exists! I'm not the type to roll around on the princess's bed, cackling like a madman!

At my reaction, Charlotte covered her mouth and laughed.

"Why not? That bed is so large that even if we sleep on opposite sides, our fingertips would never touch, even if we had the worst sleeping habits."

"Ah, why must you be like this?"

With my exaggerated protests and persistence, Charlotte seemed to be driven to the brink of insanity, talking nonsense. She didn't give me a tour of the expansive bedroom.

Given that it was a bedroom, there would likely be sensitive items. There were a few portraits, but I did not inquire about the identities of the individuals depicted.

A grown woman who resembled Charlotte.

There was no need to ask. It would surely be a painful name for Charlotte.

At that moment.

Something that was difficult to perceive as human.

That something.

I stopped thinking about it.

"Would you like to see something interesting?"

"What is it?"

With a mysterious smile, Charlotte grabbed my arm and led me somewhere. She directed me towards a wall near the bookshelves.

"You know, in novels, royalty living in places like this… when chaos erupts, they escape through secret passages."

"You don't mean…?"

"Indeed."

Charlotte fit her necklace into a groove on the wall between two bookshelves, a portion of the wall adorned with embossed column-like designs.

-Click

With that sound, the wall rotated, and Charlotte and I were transported to the other side.

I could not help but be astonished as the rotation finished.

“…What is this?"

"Fascinating, isn't it?"

Before us lay a staircase descending downward.

The bedroom was on the second floor.

However, this staircase seemed designed to lead not to the first floor, but to continue endlessly downward into the depths below.

"This is the secret passage of the Spring Palace."

"Isn't this… a crucial secret?"

Charlotte calmly nodded her head.

"Yes. Aside from me, perhaps only His Majesty the Emperor knows of it. Neither Dyrus nor, naturally, Tana would know."

Charlotte showed me her necklace.

"This is the key."

It must be an heirloom passed down through the generations of the Spring Palace's occupants.

“…Should I not be seeing this?"

"Why not?"

Charlotte tilted her head inquisitively.

"We're friends, aren't we?"

Even so, to tell me something like this…

It's starting to become a bit frightening…

"So, where does this lead to?"

"This is the heart of the empire. The secret passage wouldn't be so mundane."

Charlotte led me down the long staircase and to a room at the end.

The secret passage concluded there.

In that room stood a single door. However, there was certainly a path there.

More than a path.

A gate.

"This is…"

"If it's a place for escape, one should be able to go anywhere, right?"

A warp gate stood in this space.

—---

A miniature warp gate. Of course, it was currently deactivated.

I didn't know how far it could reach, but if it connected to other warp gates within range, it would be a perfect means of escape.

"Could spatial magic be used within the palace?"

"It's possible but restricted, but why wouldn't it work in certain areas?"

Charlotte spoke as if it were nothing remarkable.

What could be the reason for her sharing this with me?

Charlotte revealed a very important secret just for the sake of amusement. It didn't seem like she had any other intentions.

It wasn't a space she could show off like a child bragging about their home.

I must consider this gate when the gate incident occurs. I cannot determine if a monster will emerge from this currently deactivated gate, but it was certainly a place that needed to be examined.

Charlotte continued to guide me through various areas even after leaving the bedroom.

There were many spaces, but they were mostly empty or contained very few people.

As a result, the entire place felt desolate.

"The palace is large, but not many spaces are in use. Lately, there are fewer people, making it even more desolate."

It wasn't as desolate as the White Palace of Arnaca I had visited before, but the Spring Palace also seemed forlorn.

It was a different kind of desolation.

The White Palace appeared to have always been such a place.

The Spring Palace, however, seemed like it hadn't always been this way.

It had not been desolate, but was becoming so.

Somehow, it felt like a dying place.

That was the sensation it evoked.

Upon touring every corner of the palace, a considerable amount of time had passed, and the glow of the setting sun poured in.

"Not much to see, huh?"

At Charlotte's words, I couldn't help but chuckle.

It was a bit odd to say that a palace with a mini warp gate in the basement wasn't extraordinary…

"I'd like to say, what are you talking about? But honestly, I suppose it's true."

In the end, that's all there was to it.

"You're quite frank."

Charlotte seemed pleased with my answer.

Although it was a palace, it was merely a grand building. With many empty spaces, Charlotte was not so much the master of the palace as a person living in one of its

rooms.

The warm glow of the setting sun painted the corridor red, intensifying the melancholy due to the few people enjoying the light.

Amidst the desolate sunset, Charlotte, having completed the tour of the palace, gazed at me.

"It's strange."

“…What is?"

"Actually, I've always wanted to do this once."

She smiled a lonely smile.

"Bring a friend and show them where I live. Give them a tour and tell them that living in a place like this isn't all that impressive. At least, just once."

Charlotte wore an expression as if she had fulfilled an unexpected wish.

Though I was ‘coerced’ to come along, Charlotte had secretly hoped for this.

That's why, even though it was a pretense, I didn't mind, and despite knowing that Shanafel would object, she brought me along.

"You seem to know my heart quite well, Reinhardt. It's really strange… Why do you know so well? Why are you always there when I need someone?"

I had a feeling I knew what Charlotte needed right now.

Someone to simply be by her side.

That seemed to be what she needed.

"Actually, I'm going to quit the Temple soon."

At those words, my mind seemed to grind to a halt.

I couldn't tell what the warning from Gikam was, but in the end, was it meant to

reveal this to me?

If I had carried on, distracted by other matters, Charlotte would have suddenly disappeared.

Without ever knowing why she vanished, I would have spent my time in frustration, unable to ask Berthus about Charlotte's well-being.

Berthus.

Charlotte.

Had she ultimately lost to Berthus?

What, then, was the murder in the Spring Palace? Did Berthus try to kill Charlotte and fail? If so, why didn't that failure cause problems for Berthus?

The palace was so empty due to the struggle for the throne, and was it to prepare for any possible misfortune that Sabiolin Tana took charge of Charlotte's protection?

"Is it because of Berthus?"

Charlotte's reaction to my question was peculiar.

"If that's the case, what will you do?"

“…What?"

"If I ultimately lost in the struggle for the throne, and that's why things are like this, and that's why I'm quitting the Temple… If that's the case."

Charlotte looked at me.

"Then, what will you do?"

"What will happen then?"

I already knew the answer.

"The outcome for the defeated royal family in the struggle for the imperial

succession is clear. They either die immediately, or they die a little later."

Charlotte gazed at the scenery outside the palace.

"They could be killed right away, or exiled far away only to be eventually executed in their place of exile, yielding to the pleas of their vassals to eliminate the source of unrest. Oh, there are cases where they're attacked by bandits or ambushed on their way to exile… They won't be able to live."

After explaining this, Charlotte looked at me.

"If that becomes my fate, what will you do?"

My hesitation was short-lived.

No, there was no hesitation at all.

"I'll save you."

"How?"

"By any means necessary."

"Anyone can say that."

"No."

Ignoring Charlotte's words, I took a step closer to her.

"Did you forget my supernatural abilities?"

"…"

"When I believe, it happens."

Charlotte stared at me quietly.

"I will save you. That's how it's meant to be."

"It's just an excuse."

It is an excuse.

"Yes, it's an excuse."

I looked at Charlotte.

Indeed, this is just an excuse.

"But with an excuse, I became a supernatural being, succeeded in enhancing my magical power, and, despite being a beggar on the streets, I managed to enter this spring palace."

In my life full of excuses, I'll make another one. My excuses have always turned into reality.

This time will be no different.

I believe so.

"I'll save you no matter what happens, and if I fail to save you, I'll kill Berthus."

"!"

Anyone can say they will try to save you.

But not everyone can say they'll kill the next emperor if they fail to save you.

Charlotte, knowing what kind of crazy talk my words were, was shocked with her mouth agape.

I will do it.

Berthus may be my friend now, but if he kills Charlotte, he can no longer be my friend.

Charlotte tried to understand the meaning of my words but eventually gave up and let out a bitter laugh.

"You… Why are you doing all this for me? No matter how much I think about it… I really don't understand why you need to go this far, even saying such things for me."

"We're friends, aren't we?"

"!"

How many times have we repeated these words today?

In the end, Charlotte lost her words to the final echo of that phrase.

After a long silence, Charlotte swallowed and looked at me with a forced smile.

"What a shame."

What is she regretting?

"I know you've been acting strange today because you're worried about me. But this is enough."

Of course, Charlotte couldn't help but know the reason for my strange behavior today.

"It's not because of Berthus. So…"

Charlotte pinched my cheek slightly.

"You won't have a chance to cause trouble this time."

It was an expression like receiving a death sentence, something that even my excuses couldn't change.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

Tears welled up in Charlotte's eyes.

"I wanted to hear that you'd cause trouble for me."

I may not have a chance.

But Charlotte, as if it was enough just to hear those words, was crying and smiling.

CHAPTER 267

The evening meal at the Spring Palace was nothing short of splendid.

At the grandly prepared dining table, we dined with the assistance of attending maidservants. While the number of people had diminished, I didn't find the meal too uncomfortable with someone assisting me.

Despite my unintentional overeating, Charlotte watched me contentedly as I forcefully stuffed myself.

In the end, I had eaten so much that even Dyrus and Sabiolin Tana, who dined with us, appeared to be somewhat overwhelmed.

“…Really, you ate that much?"

"When else would I have the opportunity to eat like this?"

Charlotte decided to leave the temple.

As for Berthus, he was uninvolved.

Ultimately, I could not understand what had transpired here. Charlotte did not explain her reason for leaving the temple either.

Charlotte had issued a warning.

Whatever befell her, it would not be a matter involving Berthus; I should not engage in any unnecessary actions that would provoke a crisis.

Even that could potentially be false.

It was clear that there was a hidden story behind Charlotte's situation, but it was impossible for me to hear the answer.

After the evening meal, we shared various stories over tea time.

When circumstances become overly serious, people tend to engage in lighter conversations.

Once heavy subjects are broached, the atmosphere becomes dominated by that topic, leaving everyone at a loss for words.

We were precisely like that.

Having decided to return after dinner, we had to leave soon.

Although I was not yet eager to depart and would have preferred to stay the night, such a pretext would not work on Sabiolin Tana, even if it might have with Charlotte.

Charlotte bid her farewells, promising to prepare well.

"Farewell, Reinhardt. Lady Tana will escort you."

With such casual farewells, Sabiolin Tana approached to accompany me. This was less an escort and more to ensure that I left properly.

"Reinhardt."

"Ah, yes, Lady Sabiolin."

Sabiolin Tana called out to me.

"Just Tana is fine."

At her curt words, I nodded my head.

"Yes, Tana."

“…I didn't mean for you to drop the title."

"Yes, Lady Tana."

Despite the grave situation, her awkwardness was strangely endearing.

Ellen must have truly been so.

"Follow me. There's something I need to check on briefly."

Before sending me out of the palace, she seemed to have some business with me.

Perhaps she was escorting me instead of Dyrus because there was something she needed to confirm.

She led me somewhere within the palace.

To what seemed to be a training hall.

Though the torches were lit, there were no people around. Suddenly, she drew her sword.

"Take it."

It was a bit eerie, but she gripped the sword and handed it to me.

"It's nothing major. I just want to see your skills."

“…All of a sudden?"

"I was curious about the future of the empire that my junior mentioned. Since we were at a banquet then, I wanted to take this opportunity to check it out."

The world's strongest was proposing a casual spar. It certainly appeared to be without any ulterior motives. However, while she handed me the sword, she was unarmed herself.

In the training hall, there were no other weapons displayed. It was unlikely that Charlotte would practice her swordsmanship here.

"Ah, I see."

Upon my staring, she seemed to realize her own bare hands and looked at them.

"Don't worry."

-Woosh-

From her empty hands, blue mana gathered and formed the shape of a sword.

It wasn't an Aura Blade, projecting power onto a sword and overlaying it with magic.

She had reached a level where she could create a sword solely with her magic.

Surpassing even the extraordinary, she was the transcendent.

The Swordmaster who went beyond a Swordmaster, Sabiolin Tana.

But isn't this person crossing the line?

"What are you planning to do by summoning that?"

"Don't worry. I can control it. Right now, it's about the level of a sturdy wooden sword."

As if saying that a child wouldn't understand, she summoned the Aura Sword and pointed it at me.

"Ah, well, that's different then."

"Go ahead and try anything."

"Yes."

Feeling like anything I did would be futile, I approached Tana with her sword in hand.

As I moved, her shoulders and steps shifted, even though I hadn't touched her yet. She seemed to read all my possible attacks, adjusting her distance and taking a defensive stance even before I could make a move.

When I crossed swords with her, I felt like I would be immediately blocked. So, I retreated slightly and measured the distance between us.

I had never been able to do this before.

However, it became possible after I awakened my 'Intuition.'

Among the numerous abilities I received, Intuition was the most overpowered.

Of course, the Hero's Bloodline and Sacred Spirit were also incredibly powerful, but the versatility of Intuition made it exceptionally potent.

It always seemed to be activated, not just in specific situations.

In this situation, I could see my opponent's movements more clearly. Not at a level where I could read them, but more subtly.

As I observed my opponent's preemptive movements in response to mine, I could predict to some extent what kind of offense and defense would occur.

It wasn't the realm of special powers.

It was simply that I could now see what Ellen had seen.

With the help of this ability, I could do what would have taken years of training.

As I adjusted my stance and the trajectory of my sword, she moved accordingly.

Although our swords had never clashed, it felt like we had already engaged in five exchanges.

If I went in, I'd be blocked. So I tried another way, and my opponent responded with another method, so I adjusted again.

Within that repetition.

My opponent's shoulders, footwork, and the direction of her sword grip.

I continuously predicted the offense and defense through subtle changes in stance.

"…"

“…You're not just bluffing."

She must have seen what I saw but at a much higher level. That's why this exchange, not quite an exchange, was possible.

She nodded her head. She looked at me.

For some reason, I couldn't help but notice…

This person resembled Ellen in that I could read her thoughts. In the beginning, I often couldn't understand what Ellen was thinking, but with this person, it was clear.

'He's not just bluffing.'

'I heard he hasn't even been learning the sword for a year.'

'Even if he learned from a genius.'

'Is this even possible?'

'What kind of talent is this?'

‘Has his magical power been enhanced as well?’

‘Does he possess supernatural abilities too?’

‘What is this?’

‘He's terrifying.’

‘Should we invite him to Shanafel?’

‘It's tempting.’

‘But it takes too long to graduate.’

Such seemed to be her thoughts.

Why do I feel like I can read her mind only?

Swish

"That's enough. I don't need to see anymore."

In the end, she dispelled her Aura Sword without even crossing swords with me

once. I courteously returned her sword. With her lips tightly sealed, she seemed to be contemplating various thoughts as she looked at me.

I suddenly wished Ellen could be this perceptive.

"I'm not sure if you're the future of the Empire, but at least I think Epinhauser's judgment was not mistaken."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I'm merely stating the truth."

This person.

She resembled not only Ellen but Epinhauser as well, though of course they were of different ages.

She looked at me as she sheathed her sword.

"Follow me."

Without saying anything, she left the training hall and went outside to the palace gardens in full bloom. The gardeners were nowhere to be found. Had they all left for the day?

Rumble

"It seems rain is coming."

The once clear sky had suddenly become overcast, ominous thunder rumbling in the distance.

It hadn't been long since the sunset, and yet the sky had darkened so quickly.

She handed me an umbrella.

However, she didn't use one herself.

"Won't you use one?"

"No need."

Although rain seemed imminent, she walked through the palace gardens as if it didn't matter.

The palace and its gardens were vast, and it would take quite a while to exit.

No guards could be seen anywhere in the palace or its gardens.

Perhaps the mere presence of Sabiolin Tana was enough to replace numerous guards.

The few palace servants that remained seemed to have left the palace entirely.

We walked for some time.

Pitter-patter

Rain began to fall.

I opened the umbrella, but she simply let the rain fall on her. I tried to shield her with the umbrella, but she declined and kept her distance.

She walked in silence, allowing the rain to fall on her. I could tell she wasn't in the best of moods.

Together, we strolled through the rain-soaked palace gardens in spring. The tram stop was still far away.

Suddenly, she spoke.

"Her Majesty said you're someone who can take her secrets to the grave."

“…Did she?"

"Yes. She also said you've been a great help to her, a benefactor and a friend. She said it's alright to share some of my own secrets."

Apparently, such words had been exchanged between them in a separate conversation.

My own secrets.

In the end.

The outcome I had least desired.

It wasn't Berthus, or anything else. Was it all due to a problem with Charlotte herself?

"Thus, this is a highly unusual occurrence. A complete outsider like you, learning the secrets of the royal family solely through the will of Her Highness the Princess. It's not even a matter for me to decide. So, if this matter is ever leaked, not only your life but mine will be forfeited as well. Keep what you are about to hear to yourself."

With a sufficient warning, Sabiolin Tana begins to speak.

"Currently, the Spring Palace is off-limits to all outsiders. Not just foreigners, but most of the palace staff have been placed on standby outside, except for a select few who can be trusted."

So it was intended for me to hear this story from Sabiolin Tana, as Charlotte had not mentioned it herself.

Charlotte had granted me permission to know part of her secret.

"Thus, when Her Highness brought you here, both Sir Dyrus and I were surprised. It wasn't a situation that should have happened. Bear in mind that the conversations between the Princess and myself were situational, not politically motivated. I am uninvolved in all matters arising from politics."

“…Yes."

Sabiolin Tana.

Although she holds the significant title of Shanafel Commander, she has nothing to do with politics. She claims that it is a path that doesn't align with her.

"You are a psychic, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be well aware of the dangers of psychic powers, more so than ordinary people?"

"Yes."

"Her Highness's psychic ability is one of those dangerous powers. It's an ability that is difficult to control. That's why it couldn't be made public. Until now, Her Highness has been focusing on controlling her ability."

Charlotte's psychic ability.

I had only guessed that it was an offensive ability and had to be kept secret because it was of a dangerous nature.

"I can't go into details. However, both the royal family and Her Highness struggle to control that power. That's why it has become difficult for Her Highness to continue living in the Temple."

“…I see."

Dangerous and hard-to-control psychics are eliminated.

Charlotte's power is of that kind, and as a result, she might endanger the other students at the Temple.

So Charlotte can no longer go to the Temple.

Charlotte will soon leave the Temple.

It could be in a month, next week, or even starting today.

If what she said is true, then Charlotte's claim that Berthold was irrelevant would be accurate.

If that's the case.

The story that someone died at the Spring Palace…

In the end, does it mean that someone died due to Charlotte's psychic ability going out of control?

Murder.

That's why Charlotte returned to the Royal Palace instead of the dormitory.

"Today has been exceptional in many ways. Do not assume that you will be able to visit the Spring Palace again in the future."

I never thought that Charlotte would disappear from the Temple because of a power control failure, not because of a dispute over the imperial authority.

Before that.

What exactly is Charlotte's psychic ability?

Why is Sabiolin Tana even here?

Why did my intuition send a warning today?

-Flash!

-Rumble!

Amidst a streak of lightning, a flash, and the roaring thunder, I look at Sabiolin Tana.

The raindrops streaming down her cheeks as she walked, dazed in the rain, seemed like tears.

"What happens if Charlotte completely fails to control her ability?"

"There's no reason for me to tell you."

Sabiolin Tana speaks without looking at me.

Both her expression and mine had turned grim.

It seemed as if she was preparing herself for something.

Preparing for something she didn't want to prepare for.

Sabiolin Tana.

Why is the world's strongest person in charge of guarding this palace all by herself?

Why is she alone?

As far as I can see, the only other guard force besides her is Dyrus.

"If Charlotte goes berserk, you are here to intervene."

-Flash!

Amidst the lightning, Sabiolin Tana's eyes widened.

My intuition sent me a strong warning today. Even now, I could still feel that danger signal.

If that's the case.

It meant that Charlotte was going to die today.

By the hand of Sabiolin Tana.

CHAPTER 268

Sabiolin Tana was staying at the Spring Palace to deal with Charlotte in this world of shifting perspectives.

It was for the safety of the empire, not Charlotte's safety.

That much was certain.

"Spare me your words, Reinhardt, my patience is thin," Sabiolin Tana spoke amidst the rain.

Even if one were a friend of the princess, discussing the task of killing her was a topic that crossed the line. Was the reason she stood there, drenched in the rain, to torment herself with such thoughts?

The nature of the relationship between Charlotte and Sabiolin Tana was unknown. Yet, it involved laying hands on one of the most noble beings in the empire, aside from the emperor himself.

It must have been a direct order from the emperor, and Charlotte would have accepted it.

However, for the one carrying out that order, it would feel like hell.

Something would happen today, but it was only a foreboding warning, not a certainty.

Before long, the Spring Palace was receding in the distance.

I must not return to the temple.

I cannot leave Charlotte behind.

But how?

Neither Charlotte nor Sabiolin Tana would permit me to stay any longer in the Spring

Palace. I had already overstepped my boundaries. My friendship with Charlotte had granted me too much leeway.

I didn't know if Berthus was aware of this matter, but if he were, he would likely pay Charlotte no mind. There would be no reason to bother with a rival who would disappear on their own.

Soon, we approached the station.

"You know the entrance to the palace, right? I'd like to take you there myself, but I cannot leave my post for too long."

"Yes, thank you, Lady Tana."

Under normal circumstances, I would have to confirm my proper departure from the palace, but the situation was extraordinary.

She took me to the station and then returned to the Spring Palace.

I could not stay without permission.

The station was empty. Everyone who needed to return had already left, ensuring that no one would witness Charlotte's condition. The Spring Palace operated with only the bare minimum of personnel.

Now, even that minimum had been infected, save for Dyrus.

This was to ensure that no one would see Charlotte die at the hands of the Shanafel commander.

That meant the palace's defenses were currently very weak.

Could I secretly observe the situation?

The Spring Palace would be her domain. Could I evade her senses and infiltrate the palace to keep watch?

Whether it was possible or not, I had to try.

In the vicinity of the desolate Spring Palace, abandoned by people.

It was time for another daring act.

Not for me, but for Charlotte.

Just as when I first landed in this world.

As I had risked my life on the Demon Star, I now had to gamble my life within the Empire.

I could not stand idly by and watch as the first life I saved disappeared.

On a dark, autumn night with rain pouring down.

Sabiolin Tana's nerves were on edge, but not in a vigilant manner concerning her surroundings.

Her focus was solely on Charlotte. Her own sense of depression and confusion seemed quite deep as well.

In that place, I perform self-hypnosis.

I am uncertain whether erasing my presence will be possible, but I shall attempt it.

In that state, I add one more thing.

I employ 'Rewrite.'

Sabiolin Tana is unable to detect my presence as I infiltrate the Spring Palace.

[2,000 achievement points are required for this event.]

It is not an impossible event to incite, but the price is by no means cheap.

In the past, it would have been enough to purchase a talent. With these points, I had inscribed the talent of self-hypnosis.

Due to various circumstances and conditions converging, it is now possible to deceive the senses of the Grandmaster.

My current achievement points are 5,930.

If I can save Charlotte today, I would use all these points, and if they are insufficient, I would borrow more.

[I use 2,000 achievement points.]

When Sabiolin Tana disappeared beyond the garden, I left the tram stop and returned to the Spring Palace.

I place my umbrella among the flowers in the garden and also use self-hypnosis.

No one can sense my presence.

A powerful suggestion.

My self-hypnosis exerts even greater power in such real-life situations.

It reacts to my tension and desperation.

I cannot leave Charlotte to die. My sense of crisis today has made possible what was ordinarily not possible.

I succeed in infiltrating the Spring Palace.

There is a belief mixed with certainty.

I do not know if my presence has truly vanished, but I move with utmost caution due to the actual rain reducing noise.

I have created a situation where I cannot be detected by 'Rewrite,' but if I suddenly rush towards her and grab the back of her neck, she will undoubtedly notice.

Only my presence is concealed.

I cannot let my guard down.

I approach the distant Spring Palace once more.

In the cold rain, petals struck by raindrops fell.

Soah

Sabiolin Tana's figure retreating in the autumn rain.

I too, followed her, being hit by the rain.

Sabiolin Tana was not conscious of her surroundings.

As I had anticipated, she seemed heavily burdened mentally due to the overwhelming responsibility of her mission.

She would occasionally stop walking, staring blankly at the Spring Palace.

I could not tell what she was thinking.

However, I could sense an intense sorrow from her back, something she had not shown in front of me or Charlotte.

I had not expected to encounter Sabiolin Tana before the Gate incident, and I had only established a rough outline of her past without delving into details.

Sabiolin Tana did not participate in the Demon World War. To be precise, she could not.

Under the pretext that the strongest force must remain to protect the Imperial City, the Emperor had bound her to the Imperial Path.

She had not been able to use her power where it was most needed.

That formed a large portion of her guilt and sense of debt.

She had trained Ludwig to the point of torment, but it was not due to her being malicious; it was because of the extraordinary circumstances of the world being in peril.

Sabiolin Tana dies while saving Ludwig.

In doing so, she apologizes for all the harsh treatment she had inflicted upon him.

Though she is not well-known for her usual cold and rational demeanor, she is not such a person at heart.

She is, in fact, quite ordinary.

A person burdened with immense strength and the weight of countless responsibilities, she is merely an ordinary individual.

Sabiolin Tana is a distant senior of Epinhauser.

Having graduated from the temple and joined Shanafel, she must have been a knight of the empire for several decades. She even bears the nickname of "Guardian of the Royal Family."

As such, she has had many encounters with royalty.

What kind of relationship did she have with Charlotte?

Though it's not entirely clear, her hesitation and the way she cherished Charlotte could be felt in her faltering steps.

As Sabiolin Tana returned to the palace of spring, I too entered the palace.

As I stepped into the entrance of the palace, I did not feel any magical barrier.

If there had been one, I would have expected a sensation of warning, but there was none at all.

Was the security, including magical barriers, deactivated or disabled? Or perhaps all the wizards responsible for these defenses had been dismissed?

It is like a lock being unnecessary for a house with nothing to steal.

The spring palace, once impenetrable even to Sarkegaar, had become all too easy to infiltrate with the shadow of death cast upon it.

Thanks to Charlotte's guidance, I had a rough idea of what lay in various parts of the palace.

I may have forgotten after a few days, but I had just heard it.

In the vast and empty palace, there were only three people: Sabiolin Tana, Dyrus, and Charlotte.

The lights were on, but there was no one to see me.

The thunder and rain would muffle my footsteps.

I still did not know what I was supposed to do here.

A vague certainty.

For the sake of that inexplicable feeling alone, I refused to turn back and infiltrated the princess's palace.

If discovered in an unfavorable situation, even with Charlotte's favor, Sabiolin Tana would not spare me.

If caught in the wrong, I would surely die.

In the exposed light of the palace, I hid my body in the relatively darker areas, moving within the shadows.

I enhanced my hearing.

As I did so, the sound of thunder tore through my ears, and the rain sounded even more intricate.

My self-hypnosis was now at rank B. The result of continuous training after successfully enhancing my magic was an increase in rank.

As a result, its utility was ever-increasing. Its range of application had widened, and the effectiveness of existing methods had steadily improved.

Naturally, I could distinguish the sound I wanted to hear amidst other noises. This had been possible before, but now I could discern even more subtly.

I could differentiate the slightly different texture of the water dripping from the palace ceiling amidst the sound of rain.

It was easy to distinguish Sabiolin Tana's footsteps in the sea of sounds. From the sound of her footsteps, I could somewhat predict the distance between us.

Though I am not familiar with the entire layout of the palace, I have a rough grasp of

its various locations.

On the second floor, down the left hallway, lies Charlotte's bedroom. It is in that direction that Sabiolin Tana is currently heading.

I am able to distinguish her footsteps from my hiding place in a shadowy corner of the first-floor hall.

Given the eerie silence within the palace, it should be possible to hear her footsteps – the only other sounds being the thunder and rain outside.

"Her Highness?"

"She's inside."

"I see."

I could hear Dyrus's voice mingling with the others.

The sound of a door opening reached my ears.

"Your Highness, are you alright?"

"Yes, for now."

I heard Charlotte's composed voice.

Charlotte's supernatural ability – how dangerous could it be that the Emperor would have to kill his own princess? And does Charlotte accept this herself?

Did she cause the death of someone due to the uncontrolled use of her ability?

The sound of the door closing caught my attention, and no further sounds came from within.

It must be due to the soundproofing. I needed to get closer.

As I made my way up to the second floor and surveyed the area, it appeared that Dyrus had also entered Charlotte's bedroom, as there was no one in the hallway.

I cautiously approached, hiding along the inner wall of the hallway, prepared for any unexpected encounters.

I couldn't afford to make a careless sound.

Though I had taken measures to mask my presence from Sabiolin Tana, I couldn't rely on that too much.

Under normal circumstances, I would never be able to deceive someone like her.

As I drew nearer, I couldn't help but imagine Sabiolin Tana suddenly bursting out and seizing me by the throat.

My body should have been chilled by the rain, but I was so tense that I was breaking out in a feverish sweat.

It was fortunate that they were unable to use magic.

Had they employed noise-canceling magic, I wouldn't have heard a thing. As I approached Charlotte's bedroom, I could faintly detect the voices inside.

"Do you still… not remember?"

"No…"

I heard Tana's worried question and Charlotte's melancholy reply.

What did she not remember?

"I feel that the time is drawing near. When it comes, please don't hesitate, Lady Tana."

"Nothing of the sort will happen. We will surely find a solution to Your Highness's condition… The royal family is doing its utmost to search."

The royal family may be looking for a solution, but the despair in Sabiolin Tana's voice was palpable.

"There's no way they'll find a solution before my condition worsens."

Charlotte was pessimistic, and both Dyrus and Tana were unable to refute her.

"Your Highness, we really should find that child…”

"Enough, please. I've lost count of how many times I've said this. Don't mention that child."

Charlotte responded irritably to Dyrus's words.

That child must be me, of course.

Did Dyrus think that finding me would somehow improve Charlotte's condition? Why?

Even if Charlotte's supernatural ability was dangerous, what did that have to do with me?

A foreboding feeling and numerous hints were gradually leading me to entertain an unwelcome speculation.

CHAPTER 269

"Your Majesty, I have heard the stories about that child as well… If there is even a chance that the child could improve Your Majesty's condition, you must meet with him at least once. I promise you, even if the child knows nothing, I will protect their safety with my honor. Where is the child?"

"I do not know. Nobody knows. The Seal Master, the child… in the end, it's all meaningless if we don't know where they are."

Charlotte had said that only she and I knew any clue about Valier.

For some reason, she had not shared my whereabouts with the others.

Was it related to what Charlotte was going through? And had she stopped contacting Valier because she didn't want to put me in danger?

The likelihood that Charlotte's power was not supernatural was very high.

If it was merely a dangerous supernatural power, there would be no reason to suggest finding me.

"I am prepared, Ladi Tana. If I stain my hands with blood once more, kill me."

…In the end.

The death that occurred in the Spring Palace was indeed Charlotte's doing.

Her power had spiraled out of control, and she had killed someone.

And she could not remember it.

"…Your Majesty."

"Promise me."

"…I cannot make such a promise."

"Please promise me."

Sabiollin Tana gave no response to Charlotte's desperate plea for death.

The conversation ended.

I quickly hid in the instrument storeroom adjacent to the music room at the end of the right hallway. The door was open, and there were no instruments stored within. The empty racks were the only indication that it was a storeroom for instruments.

The musicians must have taken all the instruments.

I decided not to close the door, as the sound might give away my presence. Instead, I hid my body in the darkness of the room.

Neither Charlotte nor Dyrus and Sabiollin Tana would have any business here. They would have even less reason to be in the instrument storeroom than in the music room.

The storeroom was dark, as the lights were off, but all I needed was darkness and sound.

It was actually a favorable situation.

Thud

Charlotte's bedroom door opened, and I heard the footsteps of Dyrus and Tana.

"Would it not be better to watch over her while she sleeps?"

"It was useless. She has even tied herself up and slept before. But it was all in vain."

“…I see. So she has not yet managed to leave the palace?"

"Well, not yet… but she might not just be unable to leave."

"Could she possibly appear in Tetra or the Winter Palace?"

"It's just a guess. All we can do is hope that it's not possible…”

It was clear that they were discussing an incident that had already occurred, but without knowing the details of the event, I could not grasp the context of the conversation.

She is not restricted in her movement.

That was the only part I could understand, as it seemed to be related to Charlotte's power.

"By the way, is your shoulder alright?"

“…It's fine. It's not a severe injury. And it was my own carelessness. I can still handle it."

"Will you not go to the priest?"

“…If I receive treatment from the priest, it will leave a record and put us at risk. The fact that Her Majesty can hurt me… you know what that means."

"Yes."

“Your Highness might hear us. Let us refrain from discussing this matter.”

“You are right… I was too impulsive.”

It seemed that Charlotte's power had gone out of control, and Sabiolin Tana had been injured.

To think she could hurt her to such an extent.

Could Charlotte's power be strong enough to injure the leader of the Shanafel?

It appeared that the two of them were keeping the fact that Charlotte had attacked Sabiolin Tana a secret.

Had Charlotte's power gone out of control, causing her to lose her reason, and ultimately forcing Sabiolin Tana to kill her as a last resort?

Hmm…

As they approached the palace staircase leading to the first floor, Sabiolin Tana's steps came to a halt.

“Is there something wrong?”

She sensed something.

She was on guard.

“Something…”

I held my breath.

I erased my presence.

Sabiolin Tana did not sense anything. How much time had passed?

“It must be due to my lack of sleep. It's nothing.”

“It has been a few days, hasn't it?”

“Six days… or is it a week? I'm not sure.”

“Shouldn't you rest during the day?”

“There are things to attend to on this end, and I also hold the title of Shanafel's leader. There's no time for that.”

“I see…”

During the day, she attended to official duties.

At night, she guarded Charlotte.

Sabiolin Tana seemed to have gone without any rest for quite some time.

The two resumed moving and descended the stairs.

I managed to hold my breath.

A little further.

Move farther away.

“Well done, Dyrus. You may leave.”

“Yes, my lady… But are you sure you're alright? You look exhausted.”

“Even so, it's not something you can stay for, is it?”

“I see…”

“I apologize. I did not mean to be sarcastic. I must be on edge.”

“Not at all. I didn't think of it that way.”

“Is that so? I'm relieved. Rest now. You've been through a lot as well.”

“Then, let's hope for no more incidents.”

“Indeed.”

Dyrus left the Spring Palace.

I had thought that the reason for reducing the number of people in the palace was to prevent anyone from seeing Charlotte kill Sabiolin Tana, but there seemed to be another reason.

It was also to prevent someone from becoming a sacrifice to the rampaging Charlotte.

Only three remained in the palace.

Me, Sabiolin Tana, and Charlotte.

…Which meant that my life could be in danger as well.

Should I leave the palace? It was clear that I was already in danger.

I couldn't tell whether the danger signal from my instincts was about the danger

from Charlotte or the danger to myself.

I heard the sound of Sabiolin Tana sinking into a chair somewhere in the hall.

I should leave this place. Charlotte's power was formidable, and while Tana might be able to handle it, I certainly couldn't.

The one in greater danger was more likely to be me.

-Rrrrr…

I couldn't leave in the first place.

Sabiolin Tana was sitting in the hall, which was now the palace entrance. It seemed as though she was trying to monitor all directions.

-Pat! Pop!

Sabiolin Tana seemed to be operating something, as the corridor gradually brightened.

No, even the storage room where I was hiding became illuminated by a magical light.

Sabiolin Tana suddenly lit up the entire palace.

The possibility of escaping under the cover of darkness had disappeared.

In order to leave, I must do so when she vacates her position.

As expected, Sabiolin Tana did not move.

Neither could I.

The die had already been cast.

Hoping for nothing to happen, yet simultaneously feeling certain that something would inevitably occur.

I held my breath.

It was a tedious time.

But at the same time, it was incredibly tense.

For I had to constantly focus on suppressing my presence with self-hypnosis to avoid being detected by Sabiolin Tana's senses.

Sabiolin Tana did not move from her spot.

My absence at the temple might become an issue.

If nothing happens, what excuse should I make for leaving the palace so late?

Secondary problems began to arise, but they all pertain to whether Charlotte and I can safely get through today.

It was already deep into the night.

The time had surely passed midnight.

For some reason, Sabiolin Tana had lit up the entire palace.

As if to drive away the darkness.

Even the instrument storage room where I was hiding was illuminated, but it was just a blind spot. She hadn't noticed my presence.

How much time had passed in this tedious state?

-Click

The light in the instrument storage room went out.

Not just there.

The light coming from the corridor also disappeared moments later.

I couldn't tell how the palace's lights were being controlled.

Sabiolin Tana didn't move. Had she turned off the light?

Why would she suddenly turn off all the lights?

No.

This wasn't her doing.

Cautiously poking my head out towards the corridor, I saw another spectacle.

The magical lights throughout the palace flickered and went out one by one.

“At this point… even this…”

Sabiolin Tana's quiet murmur reached my ears, a voice that seemed to convey both astonishment and fear.

It was inconceivable except for the possibility that Charlotte was turning off the lights.

Why was this possible?

Why would she do such a thing?

I couldn't tell.

Sabiolin Tana stood up from her position and began to move. She was heading towards Charlotte's bedroom.

Holding my breath to avoid detection, I tensed my entire body.

She must not find me.

I've already used the amulet, and with the numerous coincidences and probabilities intertwined, I wouldn't be discovered. This includes the condition that I do my best to conceal my presence.

Not being discovered is my future, but there's no telling what might happen if I suddenly make a sound.

I have no intention of testing whether the predetermined future can be changed or not.

I can't make this life-or-death gamble any riskier.

“Your Majesty!”

“If you are awake, please respond!”

Sabiolin Tana walked down the corridor, shouting.

“Your Majesty!”

She called for Charlotte as she moved towards her bedroom.

In the dark palace of spring.

-Flash!

-Rumble

It was an even darker night due to the rain, and it was nearly impossible to discern objects without the occasional lightning flash.

No, the light from the lightning made it difficult for my eyes to adapt to the darkness. The light hindered my vision.

“Your Majesty!”

Sabiolin Tana's desperate cry echoed.

-Thud

The sound of Charlotte's bedroom door opening was heard.

-…

No sound came from Sabiolin Tana. I hadn't heard any noise like the door opening before she did so.

Then, was Charlotte asleep?

“You've… disappeared again…”

She had disappeared.

That disconnected, despairing murmur reached my ears.

In that moment.

-Flash!

"!"

I nearly let out a scream.

At the moment the lightning flickered before my eyes, I saw something.

There was something right in front of me.

It was there.

-Rumble

After a brief silence following the lightning, the sound of thunder shaking the windows trailed behind.

What was it?

Right now.

What was in front of my eyes?

I stared ahead with wide eyes, but I couldn't see the shape of whatever was watching me in the darkness. I hadn't been mistaken.

Something had undoubtedly been looking at me.

What hadn't been there just moments before had suddenly appeared.

-Flash!

Once again, the lightning drove away the darkness for a moment.

A shape revealed itself in front of me for an instant before vanishing.

I had clearly seen it.

Some shape.

It had been watching me, smiling.

It resembled Charlotte, but

it was definitely not her. Something else had been observing me from the pitch-black darkness.

I couldn't see anything.

Yet, the presence of that something in front of me was unmistakably felt.

“Heh.”

“Hehe.”

“Hehehehe…”

“Hehehehe

CHAPTER 270

The only reason I did not scream was that I clenched my jaw so tightly that my molars threatened to collapse.

Had it not been for the divine spirit supporting me, I would have fainted long ago or bitten my tongue off.

And then.

It comes.

Something.

From within the darkness, I quickly rolled my body to the side as it reached out for me.

Whoosh!

I could not tell what had passed by.

I had only felt a strong threat and instinctively rolled away.

Something brushed past where I had been. I couldn't tell what it was, but had it struck me, it would have been dangerous for certain.

One thing was clear.

Charlotte was attacking me.

"Your Majesty!"

Reacting to the laughter, Sabiolin Tana had already arrived at the instrument storage in the blink of an eye.

“…Why are you here?"

Slowly adjusting to the darkness, I could see Sabiolin Tana's figure, as well as the figure of the being staring at me from within the darkness. Startled by my presence, Sabiolin Tana's face turned blank as she looked at the entity before her.

"H-how… How did it come to this…?"

It continued to stare at me with an eerie smile. Had Charlotte's condition worsened since before?

"Step back. I will ask questions later."

As if to say that questioning this situation was for later, Sabiolin Tana hid me behind her.

"Do not stray far from me. It is dangerous."

Only then could I see what had been looming over me.

Darkness, like a living, moving blade, was being launched with precision.

Clang! Clang!

In an instant, she unsheathed her sword and deflected the charging darkness with her Aura Blade activated.

With a roar, the shadows dispersed into the air and shattered into pieces.

"Your Majesty! You must regain your senses!"

“…Hehe. Hehehehe."

It did not respond to Tana's words.

Grrr

Darkness boiled, and once more, the solidified blade swooped toward her.

Sabiolin Tana blocked the shadowy blade with her Aura Blade while standing in front of me.

She repelled the blades that came from four, then five directions with her lightning-fast speed. The pressure I felt on my skin when the sword and shadows collided told me that the power within was far from ordinary.

To manipulate darkness, or shadows.

That was Charlotte's ability.

Charlotte's ability was as sharp as it was powerful.

However, Tana had the upper hand. All attacks were blocked, and she even had room to spare.

Only, she could not harm Charlotte.

Unable to attack, she could only focus on defense.

But she had to subdue her.

She stepped through the rain of shadowy blades, one step at a time, closing in on Charlotte.

Almost there.

The moment Sabiolin Tana dared to reach for Charlotte's neck.

Flash!

As the flash of light illuminated the room, Charlotte's figure vanished without a trace.

“…Damn it."

Gritting her teeth, she stared at the spot where Charlotte had disappeared.

It was a brief exchange, but any ordinary person would have died hundreds of times during the conflict. Had I been the one to receive those attacks, I wouldn't have been able to withstand them even three times.

She turned to look at me.

Her eyes were filled with anger as evident as her despair.

Smack!

"Ugh!"

She gripped my collar and pushed me against the wall.

"You foolish oaf! Why didn't you leave when you had the chance? Did you think you could be of any help to Her Majesty here? You naive fool! If I hadn't arrived, you'd already be dead! Don't you value your life?"

Her honest rage seemed like she would sever my neck at any moment. She unsheathed her sword and aimed it at my throat.

"There are things in this world that should not be known or seen. You have ignored Her Majesty's consideration and mine as well. For that sin, you must pay with your life."

She appeared ready to thrust her sword and kill me on the spot.

To anyone who saw her, Charlotte was undoubtedly a demon.

It would be a scandal if the royal family, especially the heir to the throne, were known to be in such a state.

Rumors would spread that she had been kidnapped by the demon king and cursed.

And the reality might not be much different.

That couldn't be a supernatural power.

It was evident that Charlotte had suffered at the hands of the demon king. Whether she knew it or not, it was certain.

That's why the royal family had kept it a secret. There was no reason to spare me, who had witnessed it with my own eyes.

Death was upon me, yet strangely, I wasn't afraid.

The sight of Charlotte just now was more terrifying than Sabiolin Tana's sharp threat.

"Of course, I value my life."

“…What?"

My life is not insignificant.

I don't want to die.

But I was more afraid that Charlotte, in her current state, would not return.

"That's why I'm here, because Charlotte's life is as precious as mine. I thought maybe there's something I could do."

"You overestimate your abilities."

Her cold, piercing gaze seemed to skewer me.

"It's not arrogance."

"Then what is it? If your actions aren't arrogant, then what are they?"

"It's desperation."

Charlotte's life.

It was a reason in itself for me.

That's why I entered the palace with an odd sense of unease, disobeying the orders of the Her Majesty and the Knight Captain of Shanafel, and sneaking into the Spring Palace.

For the first time, I risked my life for something.

I couldn't bear to see Charlotte's life vanish in vain.

She looked deep into my eyes, seemingly searching for any hint of doubt, arrogance, or impetuousness.

Her sword, aimed at my throat, wavered.

How much time had passed?

Her sword slowly lowered.

She released my collar but still glared at me.

"Her Majesty will decide your fate when the day breaks."

But her gaze was one of certainty that no harsh punishment would befall me.

"May I ask what is going on?"

"No one knows."

“…No one knows?"

"Nobody knows the situation, not a soul. No one knows why the Crown Princess has come to possess such power or why she is gradually being consumed by it. Why, when night falls, that power takes over the Crown Princess's body."

Tana's desperate expression mirrored the current state of the royal family's emotions.

"Nobody knows anything. All we can do is speculate that some event that occurred in the Demon's Castle is the cause."

She watched the darkness and gripped my shoulder.

"One thing is clear; the situation has worsened. Don't stray too far from me. The Crown Princess, or rather, 'that thing' that has taken over her body, moves through the shadows. It can appear from the front, from behind, or even from the ceiling."

It seemed that, having already witnessed the situation, she had no choice but to divulge what she knew.

Indeed, it suddenly appeared before my eyes.

It moved through the darkness.

So binding Charlotte would be pointless, and even if watched, she could suddenly vanish.

That's why she illuminated the entire palace. With no darkness, there would be no shadows for it to travel.

Every night, Sabiolin Tana filled the palace with light, which seemed to work.

But that method failed tonight.

Now it can extinguish even the magic lamps at will.

The night belongs to it.

"Does this happen every night?"

"Not every night. But the frequency is increasing. And this is the first time it has extinguished all the lanterns. Moreover, the Crown Princess's eyes… Last time I saw them, only one was affected…"

Her eyes wavered, frustrated and indignant by the situation.

"Its aggression is growing. At first, it was said to wander the palace at night like someone suffering from sleepwalking… But recently…"

She trailed off.

She seemed unable to mention the murder cases.

"Anyway, you must leave the palace. It's dangerous here. Any punishment you face can only be dealt with while you're alive. If you overstep again, I will genuinely take your life."

"I understand."

Sabiolin Tana, tense and cautious, took one step at a time, her senses heightened.

In the darkness, I enhanced my sight to see through the shadows. My vision was more accurate in the dark than that of ordinary people. The distracting flash of light in my mind was also subsiding.

-sssss

Tana moved cautiously through the Spring Palace's corridor, where only the chilling sound of rain echoed. We had to go down to the hall on the first floor and leave the palace. She intended to send me away first.

"What will you do?"

"I'll have to subdue it. It's what I've been doing until now."

She had no choice but to resort to violent methods, like knocking it unconscious before it could disappear into the darkness.

It must have worked so far.

Considering her reaction and the warning from my intuition, there was only one conclusion.

Tonight marks a turning point.

One eye, which had only been partially consumed, was now entirely engulfed, as were both of her eyes.

The power that consumed Charlotte had grown even stronger today.

Would Tana ultimately fail to suppress Charlotte and end up killing her?

If so, how could I possibly stop that?

The Demon King is involved. Charlotte's power is a byproduct of his influence.

There was nothing else I could discern.

Some sort of scheme involving the Demon King.

But now was not the time for contemplation.

Tana moved cautiously, paying attention to all directions—front, back, left, right, up, and down.

Though the palace entrance was not far away, she remained vigilant.

-Clang! Crash!

The sudden shadowy blades flying like daggers in the darkness were the reason Tana could not let her guard down. The black blades darted suddenly, targeting both me and Tana.

She blocked them all on her own.

"Damn it…"

In the darkness, I saw her clench her right hand and grit her teeth.

Standing before the staircase leading to the first floor, Tana gazed across the vast hall at the entrance, her teeth clenched.

The grand palace entrance was blocked by a black barrier.

More accurately, it was obscured by pitch-black darkness.

And before that darkness, Charlotte, still wearing her spine-chilling smile, watched the two of us.

"It seems neither of us will be allowed to leave."

"…It seems that way."

As if daring us to approach, it stood motionless, blocking the entrance.

A being that could move through darkness and attack us with that same darkness.

In this place filled with shadows, the two of us might be nothing more than toys.

Though our opponent was at a distance, it could appear right before us by riding the darkness.

"Until recently, I could subdue it without much difficulty. Due to my carelessness, I sustained some injuries, though."

If it were just a minor injury, she wouldn't even mention it.

Therefore, it must not be a superficial wound.

"…"

"However, I do not know what it is, and I cannot guarantee that I can subdue it safely this time."

The continent's strongest warrior calmly estimated the possibility of defeat.

The unidentified opponent held the best battlefield and environment. And as of today, its power had grown even stronger.

Yet, standing against it was Sabiolin Tana, who had neither rested for more than five days nor received proper treatment for her injuries.

Tana's condition was at its worst.

However, even if her defeat was due to poor condition, it was still a defeat.

Death meant the end of everything. There was no room for excuses about easily subduing the opponent in better conditions.

Could it be that it is not Charlotte, but Sabiolin Tana who will die today?

Was my intuition warning me that Tana's life was in grave danger, not Charlotte's?

Sabiolin Tana is one of the main characters in the latter part of the story.

Her death would be a turning point in history, likely in a very negative direction.

But even if Sabiolin Tana dies today, it doesn't guarantee that Charlotte will live.

If Charlotte were to kill Sabiolin Tana today instead of dying, Charlotte would die tomorrow.

If the power that could kill Tana is dangerous and uncontrollable, then regardless of the wielder being a princess, there would be no choice but to deal with her immediately.

Both Sabiolin Tana and Charlotte would die.

If so, then soon, I too would die today.

I am the only variable in this equation.

I must somehow resolve this situation.

But in these two battles, I was too small a variable.

"Reinhardt, you said you could enhance your magical power on your own."

“…Yes."

There was no room for saying it wasn't enough for actual combat.

"I will fight while protecting you, but I cannot guarantee that I will be able to protect you without fail. Remember that my priority is first to the fight, then to myself, and lastly to you."

She handed me her sword.

"These shadows cannot be countered without magical power. You may not be able to imbue a sword with magic, but with this sword, you should be able to repel them."

She seemed to be planning to fight using her Aura Sword since she could summon it.

Sabiolin Tana's sword.

Though not a sacred relic, it was one of the empire's treasures.

Tempesta, the Gale Sword.

In my hands was the sword that Ludwig, who possessed Alsebringer, had claimed as Tana's legacy and made his second sword.

"I will manage."

Summoning the Aura Sword would consume a lot of stamina.

I must not do anything that would worsen Tana's condition.

"As I said, it may be difficult to protect you…"

-Swoosh

I summoned it.

"I have this black sword as well."

"Soul binding…?"

Her eyes widened as she looked at the sword with the ivory-colored blade in my hand.

"This… how did you get this!"

She stared in astonishment at the Tiamata, the sacred relic of duality, in my hand.

"We can discuss it later."

I hadn't expected to use it in a place like this.

Now, I must face my first real battle using Tiamata.

Not against a bandit, a monster, or a deserving villain.

My first friend.

I must face Charlotte in real combat.

For now, she swallowed all her questions.

"…Fine."

Both she and I understood the gravity of the situation.

CHAPTER 271

The expression of the being that looked upon me twisted in a flash, its displeasure spreading across its mocking smile.

Had it recognized Tiamata?

Grrr!

From the wall of darkness blocking the entrance, it wasn't a blade that emerged, but a wave.

Only then did we realize that the being had not been putting forth its full strength, but simply toying with us.

With that, we became certain.

Today, death would come for Sabiolin Tana.

"Huff!"

-Boom! Crash!

A wave could not be stopped by a sword.

She did not use a sword.

However, she managed to negate the surrounding darkness by releasing an immense magical power from the barrier of magic that enveloped her.

-Grrrr!

The shock was enough to crack the palace floor, and witnessing it from close by, I was at my wit's end, unrelated to the current situation.

The darkness was dispelled with the mere release of her pure magical power.

Was it possible for such a monstrous grandmaster, transcending the limits of humans, to wield an S+ rank of magical power?

The strength she displayed in her worst condition was unbelievable.

Darkness surged from all directions. Although Charlotte, who was blocking our path, was right in front of us, I turned my body towards the intense sensation of danger I felt from behind.

The darkness bore down on me.

While maximizing my physical enhancements.

I trusted.

I might not be able to do as much as Sabiolin Tana, but.

I believed I could do it.

No.

It was more than just belief.

I had already succeeded once.

The second time should naturally be easier.

With extreme exhilaration coursing through my body, I parried the incoming dark blades with Tiamata.

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

I had no time to marvel at the fact that I didn't spit blood.

The force imbued in it was so tremendous that it felt like my hand would be torn apart.

-Bang! Crash! Boom!

Sabiolin Tana approached Charlotte, descending the stairs little by little.

Did this battle have any meaning?

Would we be able to subdue Charlotte before we melted away into the darkness?

There was no guarantee that just because we had done it before, it would be possible now. Charlotte was focusing her attack on Sabiolin Tana rather than me.

All I had to do was stay alive.

As long as I didn't interfere with Tana. The moment she had to worry about me, everything would be over.

-Shriek!

-Screech!

"Argh!"

It was fortunate that Tiamata could effectively counter this darkness. If it had been an ordinary sword, it would have been either cut or passed by the dark blades.

This was not swordsmanship. I had never learned to fight against such a thing.

However, in a fight, you can't choose your opponent.

Even if you don't know the way, you must do it.

I had no choice but to focus on responding to the attacks directed at me while keeping an eye on them.

-Rumble! Roar!

It was hard to believe that this was a human fight, as Sabiolin Tana charged at Charlotte like a monster, leaping and bounding.

As the waves of darkness pressed in, she repelled them with a surge of magical power, scattering the blades with a single stroke of her sword.

I couldn't even guess what she could do in her best condition.

In a flash, Sabiolin Tana charged toward Charlotte, attempting to seize her.

Whoosh -

Yet, she merely vanished, melting into the darkness.

"Damn it…!"

She reappeared twenty paces to Tana's right.

Around Charlotte, shadowy spears materialized like lances.

Bang! Bang! Bang! -

Once again, Tana charged in.

Though she tried to break through the storm of spears and subdue Charlotte, the latter disappeared into the darkness just before contact.

Tana was like a spear that could pierce anything, but the shield she needed to penetrate didn't permit any hits.

She needed to be faster then. Capture Charlotte before she could melt away.

However, Sabiolin Tana, who was already giving her all, couldn't become any faster.

To be quicker, she needed to reach out not with her hand but with her sword.

Soon, it was inevitable that Charlotte would have to be killed.

The only choice left for Sabiolin Tana, who wanted to subdue Charlotte, was to be killed by the being controlling the darkness after a drawn-out battle.

I was already on the verge of being cornered, just from fending off the shadowy blades that surged towards me.

I couldn't help Sabiolin Tana, and even if I tried to, I would only put her in more danger.

"Ugh!"

It wasn't just the unfavorable condition that was the problem.

I could see her right shoulder dyed in blood.

Come to think of it, she had been wielding her sword, Tempesta, with her left hand until now.

Her right hand had been completely unusable, but as the situation grew dire, she started swinging the sword with both hands.

Could she be right-handed?

If so, a right-handed person had been using a sword with only their left hand until now.

Of course, there were many cases of using a sword with both hands, but having one arm disabled meant a reduction in combat power by half, if not more.

Therefore, Sabiolin Tana, who even used her injured right arm, had undoubtedly torn open a wound that hadn't healed properly.

Gritting her teeth, the whites of Tana's eyes were tinged with blood.

"Heh… hehe… hehe… hihi…"

Charlotte was laughing.

She was delighted to see Tana reaching her limit.

After that, three times.

Tana succeeded in getting close to Charlotte by mobilizing her injured right arm.

But, in a moment of intense struggle, she reached out with her hand instead of her sword.

Three times she could have killed Charlotte, but three times she attempted to subdue her instead.

Crash!

"Ugh!"

As a result, her right arm was completely shattered by the shadowy blade, and she slammed into the wall.

Thud!

As she hit the wall, I could clearly see cracks spreading like a spiderweb where she had collided.

"Ugh… ack!"

Thump!

She coughed up blood and collapsed onto the floor.

Could it be?

Was she dead?

I couldn't tell.

Even if she wasn't dead yet, she would die if things continued like this.

Swish!

The final blow, a shadowy spear, was launched toward Sabiolin Tana.

I must…

Block it.

No.

I will block it.

Swoosh!

Reacting to my desperate wish, my body transcended its limits for a moment, sweeping away the shadowy spear that was charging toward Sabiolin Tana.

I stood in front of the fallen woman, blocking her path.

The entity gazed at me with a chilling smile as it faced my obstruction.

I couldn't tell if it understood my words or not.

Was it a lifeform born from pure malice?

It possessed only the intent to kill, with no ability for conversation or communication.

Sabiolin Tana had lost consciousness.

Charlotte had said that when her powers went berserk, she would lose her memories from that period.

There was no reason to hesitate now.

From this moment on, I had anticipated a certain extent of what would happen.

Even in the worst condition, if there was an entity capable of pushing the strongest being in the world to the brink like this, there could be only one.

The ancient Demon King, Vallie.

I used the Ring of Sarkegaar.

"As the rightful ruler of Darkland and the emissary of the demon world, I ask you."

I returned to Vallie's form and stared at the entity.

"Who are you?"

Unfortunately, the reaction I had hoped for did not come.

"Heheheheheheheh…"

It simply let out a deep, low laugh, just like before.

Was it not the Demon King?

Or was it just a remnant, a residue close to the traces of the Demon King? I gripped Tiamata tightly, looking at the being that was merely a fragment of the madness once possessed by the Demon King.

Though I didn't expect much from it, my demonic control ability wouldn't work either. I couldn't tell whether my power was too weak or, even as a remnant, it was an Archdemon immune to such influence.

The result was the same.

Whether I revealed myself as Vallie or not, there was no option to avoid the fight.

I returned to Reinhardt's form.

I did not want to fight in Vallie's form.

I spoke to it.

"If you are not the Demon King, not recognizing your king is your sin… and if you are the Demon King, then not recognizing your own child is a sin as well."

"Heh, heh. Hehe. Haha. Hmph."

The entity, increasingly consumed by madness, prepared a wave of darkness.

"What angers me the most is that you, of all things, have entered Charlotte's body and caused this chaos."

Uuuuung

Tiamata cried out.

It was a bizarre sensation, as if the sword itself was howling.

"So, whatever you are, you've angered me and must face the consequences."

A barrage of dark spears rushed toward me.

Tiamata's condition was far from normal.

It seemed possible now.

I thrust Tiamata towards the oncoming storm of dark spears.

Flash!

A brilliant light, centered on Tiamata, filled the Spring Palace in an instant.

Divine Magic, Sanctuary.

"Aaaargh!"

I successfully manifested the magic Olivia Lanze had planted within me.

For some time now, I had been engaged in this endeavor.

I shared Tiamata with Olivia Lanze. So, I called upon Olivia and spoke with her about it.

About Tiamata.

"It's about Tiamata."

"Mhm. What about it?"

"Honestly, isn't it useless?"

"It's still a sacred relic… Isn't that a bit harsh?"

"What is this about? This is not even a divine entity itself, but merely an artifact created by a deity. And I didn't say that the relic is useless."

"Then what is useless?"

"Perhaps I should say it doesn't suit me well."

Olivia understood what I meant.

"Hmm… that's true, among the relics, Tiamata and Alicion have always been used by the Order. Reinhardt, you are the first to become the Champion of Tu'an without being a priest, aren't you?"

"Exactly. I don't know how to use divine power, yet this is a divine power amplifier. What am I supposed to do with it?"

"But don't you handle the sword itself well? Of course, there is a story that if you harm innocent lives with Tiamata, you will face the judgment of Tu'an."

"That's just a superstition."

No matter how it turns into a dark relic, it's useless to do anything with the innocent blood.

"Well, how can you call the official doctrine of the Tu'an Order a superstition?"

"If it's not true, it's superstition. You know enough by now, don't you?"

"You really don't hold back… Anyway, the problem is this."

Although Tiamata is a very powerful relic, it is fundamentally a tool for priests or paladins, so in my hands, it's nothing more than a well-handled sword.

It's not a valuable item like Lament or Alsebringer, even if I don't have divine power.

Olivia stared at me as if to ask what I wanted to do about it.

"So, you and I share this artifact, right?"

"Heh, it feels great like we're co-owning property…"

"…Why are you bringing that up?"

"Isn't it? It's not co-owning property, but a soul bond, so you and I are soul companions, aren't we? We've already… come this far…"

"Please restrain yourself!"

"You always get angry! I hate you! Even if you always treat me coldly, don't you find it cute how I keep following you as soon as you call me?"

"Shut up and just listen to me."

"What is it?"

What I wanted from Olivia, whose character seemed to be growing more and more, was that.

"Tiamata is, in a sense, a divine power amplifier."

"Indeed, it contains an immense amount of divine power, whether in the form of Tu'an or Kier."

"Can't I use that?"

"Hmm?"

Olivia tilted her head.

"So, you're asking if you can utilize the divine power that is inherent in the sword itself?"

"Yes."

"That's a creative idea. Then, you should first join the Tu'an Order, shouldn't you? People will love it. 'The Champion has come of his own accord!' they will say."

"You know that's not what I mean."

I cannot use divine power. However, the relic I possess is an item that allows those with divine power to maximize their power. Tiamata in my hand is a well-handled sword, and an even better-handled sword against the undead.

But in the hands of a paladin, it turns an already human-tank-like paladin into a human slaughter weapon.

I want to draw out more power from Tiamata.

So, I asked Olivia Lanze for help.

"Can't you imbue Tiamata with power, Senior, and allow me to activate and use it when needed?"

"Hmm… Such a concept isn't entirely unheard of. There are magical tools and artifacts that have divine magic imbued in them, which can be used by non-believers."

"Are there?"

"Yes, but I don't know if that would apply to a holy relic as well. And it only refers to very minor miracles, not large-scale ones or powerful divine magic."

"But this situation is unique. There's only one object, but two owners. And two soul bindings."

As much as I hate to admit it, Olivia and I share the same object, albeit not connected by the soul.

I wanted to know if it was possible for me to wield the influence Olivia has on Tiamata.

"I don't know. We'll have to try. But why?"

"There's no harm in knowing how to use the relic more effectively, right? You never know when or where something might happen."

"Hmm… You're planning to do something bad again, aren't you?"

"No, who said that?"

"That's right. Even if you don't have any thoughts now, you'll surely use it for something bad later."

Yes.

There was an intention back then.

It wasn't meant to be used like this now.

When there was trouble with the vampires of the Vampire Council, powerful divine power would be helpful.

It was a plan to threaten the vampires, and I couldn't even tell Olivia my true intentions.

Under such intentions, I asked Olivia to inscribe divine magic on Tiamata and continued to practice using it.

Naturally, it didn't work well.

Without inscribing a new divine talent, it was impossible. The divine power, built upon faith and prayer, didn't suit me – not just because I was the Demon King, but because of who I am. I have enough faith in myself without believing in something else.

But now, for some reason, I had a conviction that it could work.

Tiamata weeps.

That feeling, as if the sword had awakened, gave me confidence.

Now, I believed I could do it.

"Kiaaaak! Kyaak!"

-Grrrrrr!

In the midst of a scene where the light of the sanctuary and the remnants of the Demon King clashed fiercely, writhing in darkness, I clenched Tiamata in my hand.

The Holy Sword Tiamata.

It responded to my will, emitting divine power.

I watched the white letters on Tiamata's ivory blade shine with radiance.

'Purify the world with wrath.'

Suddenly, I realized as I saw those words.

Wrath.

Tiamata reacts to wrath.

My rage against that wretched thing that dares to consume Charlotte's soul was drawing out Tiamata's power.

-Grrr! Grrr! Grrr!

It was in pain, spreading both hands and pushing towards me.

"Kuh… ugh!"

-Grrrr!

It was merely a clash of intangible forces - light and darkness.

But it felt as though we were locked in a struggle, pushing against each other.

As it pushed me back, I had no choice but to retreat a step, as if being repelled by a counterforce.

Rumble!

Light and darkness collided, creating a thunderous noise. As the light and darkness clashed, they began to push each other back.

It is the strongest sword for the undead.

However, the light emanating from Tiamata itself was a definite countermeasure against the being that moved through darkness and attacked using darkness.

The scattered rays of light that clashed effectively blocked its movement.

I had to push it back and suppress it.

After blocking its surroundings with light, I had to subdue it.

Although it wasn't the power I had planted for this purpose, I had no choice but to use it now.

Drawing out the light from the sword, I tried to walk step by step towards the being of darkness that was desperately trying to push me back.

With all my might, I took a step forward, and it retreated a step.

Corner it against a wall, bind it with light, and render it unconscious.

Rumble! Rumble! Crash!

The fierce mingling of light and darkness was like a mixture of fire and lightning.

The darkness retreated little by little as I advanced.

Could it be that it could swallow the light of a magical lamp, but not the light based on divine power?

Roar!

I screamed in the midst of a world-shattering noise.

"Release Charlotte!"

"Aaaargh!"

The being let out a painful scream every time I took a step forward.

It was definitely being affected.

Whether it was the divine power or the light that had an answer, the being was in agony.

"Kyaaargh! Kack!"

Emitting an inhuman wail, the darkness surrounding the area of light tried to engulf and consume it.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Olivia Lanze's power.

Amplified through Tiamata as a medium, it not only defended against the attacks of darkness emitted by the unidentified being, but also effectively pushed back the surrounding darkness.

The light was scattered.

Beyond the sanctuary pouring out of the sword, the light intertwined with the darkness like a snake, burning the darkness and being consumed by it in turn.

It was a bizarre sight of white and black flames burning.

It was a chaotic scene where beasts of light and darkness tangled together, hard to believe even when seen with one's own eyes.

"Ugh!"

However, the darkness did not retreat easily.

The materialized darkness pushed back the materialized light, and as a result, seemed to push me back, holding the light.

It was a strange sensation, as if Tiamata itself had collided with the repulsive force of a powerful magnet.

Kyaah!

The being screamed with all its might, trying to push me back. It reached out for me, and I was in the midst of desperately pushing my arm forward to break through.

My strength was waning.

Rumble!

Still far away.

Groan!

And the opponent's strength was greater than mine.

I was being pushed back.

At this moment, when I was losing in terms of strength, I had to focus all my energy on not retreating rather than advancing.

"Damn… I don't want to rely on a crutch again…!"

I tightened my grip on Tiamata.

I added more strength.

I added all the strength I possessed.

Though I have reached my limit, somehow I must muster the strength.

I cannot guarantee that I won't cough up blood.

But I believe I won't.

I hope that by doing so, I can restore Charlotte.

I do it.

I enhance my magical power.

Relying on the strength of physical and magical enhancements at their peak, I push forward to dispel the darkness.

I must push forward.

Grrr!

With an intense feeling of exhilaration, as if every cell in my body is awakening from their extremities.

Hmmm!

Not only the divine magic but also the protection of Olivia Lanze imbued in Tiamata strengthens my body.

Squish. Squeeze!

With the intense muscle enhancements, every muscle, every fiber seems to scream as they surpass their limits.

I believe.

I will take a step forward.

Thud!

Despite merely taking one step, a thunderous noise shook the entire palace.

My body does not crumble as the divine power granted by Olivia Lanze fortifies it. The muscle fibers break and heal in real-time, and I feel my magical circuits boiling as if on fire.

The steps I must take number more than thirty.

It isn't difficult.

I simply need to walk; that's all there is to it.

Nothing could be easier.

It's just that each step feels a bit heavier.

Thud!

Twenty-nine steps remain.

Rumble!

In the fierce battle between darkness and light, the power truly originating from me is not much.

Excluding magical enhancements and supernatural abilities, all power is borrowed.

No, even that is not my power; it too is borrowed.

There is only one thing I can do.

Take a step, enduring the pain of my fragile body.

Overcome the agony.

Not lose consciousness.

Take a step.

Keep walking.

That is all there is to it.

I have borrowed everything.

Nothing is truly mine.

Everything is borrowed assets.

Wielding unjust power with borrowed strength, I must at least be formidable.

"Grr… Ah… Ugh!"

"Hee, hee hee hee! Hah hah! Hee hee hee hah!"

Whether it is madness or terror, the dark being screams.

I continue to believe.

I will not fall.

I will take a step.

If I can reduce these steps to twenty-eight.

I can survive tonight.

Even if I cannot predict the future, I can save today's Charlotte.

If tomorrow is dangerous too?

Then I will save her tomorrow.

And the day after, and the day after that.

I will keep going, day by day.

For Charlotte, for the life I saved, beyond survival…

Something more.

I will let her live a life.

I will gift her that.

Crossing the boundaries of suggestion.

Crossing the boundaries of faith.

I will drive away the darkness that covers where spring should be.

I will restore what rightfully belongs here.

You, who love flowers.

I will bring you back.

Just as I once saved you.

This time too.

And the next time.

And the time after that. Continually.

"Ah, ah, ah!"

Thud!

One step.

Thud!

Two steps.

Roar!

In a single stride, I take three steps forward.

Crack!

Shriek! Caw! Screech!

Ignoring the pain of bones breaking and rejoining.

Believe you feel it, and you do.

Believe you don't feel it, and you won't.

Self-suggestion.

I aim to surpass even that power.

Blood from my eyes clouds my vision.

Still, I do not close my eyes.

Thump!

With each step forward, I face something, its expression turning from astonishment to horror – the remnants of the Demon King.

But at the same time, I face Charlotte.

I walk towards her.

Thump!

Rumble!

After multiple steps, I manage to bring the entity within my grasp.

“Screeeech!”

Its abyss-like black hair flutters wildly in the light, and its torn red pupils fill with horror and astonishment.

It is right before me.

Unable to escape, it struggles just as much as I do.

In the midst of a tension that makes my entire body feel exposed to cutting winds, I reach out and grip its throat.

My right hand's fingernails break and the bones twist as I grip Charlotte's throat.

Rumble!

“Gr… uh…! Ugh…!”

Self-suggestion works only for me.

Believe that, and it applies only to me.

I must surpass that stage.

Not just for me, but for others as well.

“Disappear…!”

“Heh, heh, heh, heh! Hic! Hic! Heeek!”

It is not enough to believe to apply my power to others.

I must declare it.

Not a power that comes from believing, but a power that comes from declaring it will be so.

I want it.

I want it, and I will have it.

“Disappear from Charlotte's body!”

[Self-suggestion Rank increases.]

[Self-suggestion A Rank achieved.]

[Derived ability emerges]

[Awakening of Word Spirit]

Flash!

My words…

Moved the world.

In the darkness.

In the rain-filled night.

Rumble

Charlotte realized she was being held by someone in the darkness.

“Uh… Wh-who…?”

“…Awake, are you?”

Though she could not see clearly, Charlotte knew it was Reinhardt's voice.

“Rein… hardt? Reinhardt?”

“…Yes.”

His cracked voice made it clear that the situation was not ordinary. Why hadn't he returned? Why was she in the palace hall and not her bedroom?

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Charlotte could see.

The fallen chandelier, the palace in disarray as if a giant beast had rampaged through

it.

And then.

His face bloodied and wounded, it was a wonder he was still alive.

Reinhardt's face appeared.

Despite his grievous injuries that made it surprising he was conscious, Reinhardt had laid Charlotte down using his knee as a pillow.

She could not understand the situation.

She did not know why he hadn't returned.

Charlotte vaguely realized.

“Did I… hurt you…?”

In the end, I had lost my reason once again, and under the influence of a strange power, I hurt Reinhardt.

If it weren't for me, such a thing would never have happened.

As despair and guilt welled up inside her, Charlotte was on the verge of tears.

Swoosh

“No.”

Reinhardt, his hand injured to the point of exposing the bones, trembled as he gently brushed back his hair.

“It's not that you hurt me…”

As Reinhardt brushed his hair, he looked down.

“I saved you…”

Charlotte could not understand what he meant.

“Just remember it that way…”

Although it was true that she had hurt him, Reinhardt only insisted that she remember the more important fact.

“What… what happened? Reinhardt, what happened? What happened to us?”

Charlotte wanted an explanation, but Reinhardt was not in a condition to provide one.

“I'm sorry… for throwing away the flower.”

Reinhardt made an entirely unexpected apology.

What did it matter at this point?

Instead of expressing gratitude for saving her, he suddenly apologized.

“If I accepted it… in that situation, with that meaning… it would feel like the last gift I received from you… and I didn't want that…”

Please think of me.

The flower with such meaning.

Reinhardt knew that.

He knew that the seemingly insignificant flower was a farewell gift.

“That's why… I threw it away…”

To reject the subtle farewell gesture Charlotte offered.

Reinhardt had thrown that flower away.

With those final words, Reinhardt lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 272

A strange ceiling.

This time, it's truly an unfamiliar ceiling.

No, it's not even a ceiling to begin with.

I see something like a silk curtain.

What is this?

Why is the bed so wide?

I sat up and looked around.

The ceiling is unfamiliar, but the room isn't.

"…"

I think this is Charlotte's bedroom.

I've been here before, so I could quickly recognize the room.

It seems I was sleeping on Charlotte's massive canopy bed.

"Ah, you're awake!"

Upon seeing me sit up, Charlotte almost threw herself at me, embracing me tightly.

The bed is indeed spacious.

She must have been watching over me from the bedside, but to reach me, she had to climb onto the bed and launch herself.

"Uh, um… Yeah."

"Are you okay? Are there any aches or pains? Your eyes, your hands, are they alright?"

"Uh, um… Yeah. I think I'm fine."

"I'm so relieved… I'm so relieved…"

I didn't worry about being hurt, nor did I expect to be in perfect shape, but my condition was much better than after the last magical enhancement. Charlotte held me close, then pulled back slightly to look at me.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I'm so relieved, Reinhardt."

"Um… Yeah. Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

With clear tears streaming down her face, Charlotte embraced me once more.

She didn't scold me or say anything else.

She simply held me close for a while, seemingly relieved that I was unharmed.

At first, I thought she might just be sniffling.

"Sniff… Sigh… Sob…"

As she cried a little, her emotions eventually overwhelmed her, and she began to sob. Unsure of what to do, I patted Charlotte's back.

"But… This isn't the first time something like this has happened, right?"

"Sob… Yes…"

"I've been unconscious for several days, and I want to know what's been happening."

With my tendency to faint at the drop of a hat, as if there were an unfamiliar ceiling quota, the first thing I wanted to know when I woke up was the situation at hand.

Waking up in the princess's bedroom was already unusual.

"Just… give me a moment…"

Charlotte seemed to think that stopping her tears was the priority. After sniffling for a while and catching her breath, she pulled away from my embrace. With swollen eyes, she covered her face and asked.

"…Did my eyes get puffy?"

"…You think they'd swell up that quickly?"

Well, honestly, they did swell up a bit.

But swelling depends on the person. She's allowed to be puffy. Charlotte lowered her hands from her face.

"It hasn't been that long. The incident happened the day before yesterday, and today is Friday. The reason you're in my bedroom… It's to keep others from knowing that you're in my palace."

I passed out on Wednesday, skipped Thursday, and now it's Friday.

"Fortunately, due to the heavy rain and the severe thunderstorm, what happened that day remained unknown. Neither people nor surveillance spells were effective in the downpour, so only you, I, and Lady Tana are aware of the incident. The palace suffered significant damage, but… there's no need to worry about that."

Lady Tana had somehow managed to cover up my actions that day. However, neither Charlotte nor Tana seemed to know the full extent of what had transpired.

"I thought it best to keep your presence a secret, so I had you resting in my bedchamber. As for healing… I was considering calling a priest, but it was somewhat risky… so I used an Elixir."

"An Elixir?"

"Yes."

Was it the Elixir I was thinking of?

As far as I knew, there were only a few bottles of it in the empire, and it was considered a national treasure—not merely a potion.

No wonder I felt surprisingly well.

"Is it okay to use it so casually?"

"Why would it be casual?"

Somehow, her words were strangely touching.

"Besides, it was Lady Tana who brought it."

Touching moment canceled.

If it was the commander of Shanafel, she could have obtained a bottle of Elixir without much trouble.

Anyway, I was fine, but what about that man? Judging from Charlotte's reaction, he seemed to be okay.

"Your Highness, may I come in?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, Lady Tana's voice came from beyond the door. Charlotte glanced at me.

It seemed like a sign asking if it was okay for her to enter.

What's going on?

I'm the owner of this room, so why is she asking for my permission?

It feels strange!

I nodded, and when Charlotte called for her to enter, Lady Tana, dressed in her uniform, stepped into Charlotte's bedroom.

"You're awake."

"Ah, yes."

She looked at me, sitting nonchalantly on Charlotte's bed, without showing any particular emotion.

Both Charlotte and Tana had many questions for me.

How I had acquired Tiamata, what happened after I passed out, and so on.

She pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed.

…She's too far away.

Although she was technically sitting next to me, there was a considerable distance between us. Charlotte, who had been sitting beside me, scratched her cheek.

"I should change this bed."

The overly large and uncomfortable bed.

I too had experienced the wonders of the dormitory bed alongside Charlotte.

"Since I'm not in pain, let's sit down and talk."

I got off the bed and sat down on the sofa.

Charlotte took the seat of honor, while Tana and I faced each other.

"First, I want to say thank you, Reinhardt. I don't know the specifics, but on that day, you saved not only me but also Her Highness."

Considering the damage done to the palace, Lady Tana must not have revealed that she had been subdued during the battle. If she had, Charlotte would not have been allowed to stay in her palace.

She must have falsified her report. Upon hearing Tana's words, Charlotte seemed to come to her senses and looked at me.

"I haven't properly expressed my gratitude either. Thank you so much, Reinhardt."

Charlotte looked at me and smiled.

It wasn't the eerie, creepy smile she had shown when consumed by power.

Yes.

I wanted Charlotte to keep showing me such a smile.

The awakening of the Word Spirit was secondary.

It was not for power, but for Charlotte.

"Before you ask me anything, I'd like to know the situation."

I stared at Charlotte.

"Is your problem resolved?"

I had awakened the Word Spirit.

I had commanded the thing that had controlled Charlotte's body to disappear.

"Has it truly disappeared?"

Instead of explaining something, I wanted to know that first. Charlotte's expression was ambiguous.

"I'm not sure. But yesterday, I was fine… and… there's this indescribable feeling. Should I say it's hard to bear? It's as if something is devouring me. It's a mix of anxiety, a sense of crisis, and such. That tormented me every night, but it's gone now, all of a sudden."

"And the ability itself?"

"It remains."

The anxiety has vanished. Whether that's enough or not, it would mean Charlotte's safety was secured for now.

The power to control shadows still lingers. That's a worrisome factor. Charlotte refrained from demonstrating her ability directly.

Only now did I understand why Charlotte disliked her own power. Who would like a power that seems to consume oneself?

"Well, for now, we'll have to monitor the situation, but it's evident that some change has occurred in Your Highness. Although we tried everything we could with magic and divine power, none of it had any effect."

Both Tana and Charlotte looked at me.

"Reinhardt, what exactly did you do?"

The spirit.

It had already become a part of my power.

So it would show up in a physical scan.

"I believe my psychic ability has become stronger."

While it was certainly deemed dangerous, I had no choice but to tell the truth since I couldn't hide it.

—---

I roughly explained the situation.

The first thing I explained was about Tiamata.

A sword with wicked power brought from Darkland.

Charlotte already knew about this issue, so it was easy to talk about. I told her that the object, presumed to be a relic of the Demon King, had become imperfectly soul-bound with me, and after various judgments, I purified it, transforming it into Tiamata.

I left out the part about not being able to distinguish between the Demon King and the God. I simply said Tiamata was in a corrupted state.

In doing so, I had no choice but to bring up Olivia Lanze's story.

Both Tana and Charlotte were shocked by my words.

Tiamata's potential for corruption and my being chosen for it.

"This… was a complex matter to explain, so I had to keep it secret."

"I see…"

"It's certainly an issue that could turn the religious world upside down…"

It took both of them quite a while to recover from the shock.

Anyway, since the result was what it was, neither of them disputed the issue. Charlotte even thanked me for telling her, as it seemed she could worry less about the suddenly vanished relic of the Demon King.

And then, the psychic power.

Since I shouldn't be aware of the concept of spirits myself, I explained it vaguely.

I also explained the battle against whatever had dominated Charlotte.

When I shouted for it to disappear, it vanished completely.

There was only one logical explanation.

"Your ability to use self-hypnosis on others has evolved, it seems?"

"Because if it isn't that, the situation doesn't make sense."

My ability to apply self-hypnosis to others had become possible.

The spirit wasn't a concept much different from that.

If self-hypnosis is a power manifested through belief, I understand that suggestion is a slightly different concept, manifested through command or declaration.

"Could the answer… have been a psychic ability?"

Psychic abilities are explained by the word "anyway."

They are inexplicable, and the miracles they cause manifest through a logic that does not exist in the world.

That is why it is impossible to understand, but inevitably acceptable, that a psychic ability could solve Charlotte's problem, which could not be resolved by any other means.

Tana finds it difficult to accept this nonsensical situation that has become a reality, but eventually, her expression seems to say that she has found an exit after struggling through hell.

"That means… you are the only one who can heal Her Highness's condition."

"…It might be so."

For now, Charlotte's worsening condition has improved, but no one knows what will happen later. I am the only contingency plan for that situation.

It's as if I were to become Charlotte's primary physician.

But Charlotte's expression was grave.

"It's too dangerous a power. As much as mine, if not more so."

The evolution of self-hypnosis.

The fact that it is now applicable not only to oneself but also to others makes it far more dangerous.

Neither self-hypnosis nor suggestion appeared in the original work.

So, I don't know what this power can do. Although the awakened suggestion may not be absolute right now, if the level of ability gradually increases, it might make the impossible possible.

Of course, Charlotte was not thinking of eliminating me because my power was dangerous.

"I don't know how your new power will be measured, but I'll instruct the Temple to keep it a secret."

She meant to keep my new power a strict secret for my protection. Muzzle the Temple, and probably only Professor Epinhauser would know the true nature of my ability, even if they knew.

In fact, it was a dangerous ability, and if we look back at the fight the day before, I managed to subdue Charlotte, whom Sabiolin Tana couldn't subdue.

Of course, the actual situation was a bit different. If Sabiolin Tana had had Tiamata, or if there had been a high-ranking knight, the story might have been different.

In many ways, she had fought a foe with a bad compatibility under the worst conditions.

The new ability will be kept secret. It was clear that this would be better. Tana seemed to have a slightly different idea.

"What about having Reinhardt stay at the Spring Palace?"

There was no guarantee that Charlotte's condition was genuinely improved. Since no one knows what might happen at any time, I, the only person who can deal with it, would live with Charlotte at the Spring Palace.

It wouldn't look good externally, but since the princess's life was at stake, the emperor wouldn't oppose it either.

"No. Even if we hide it, Reinhardt is in the same class as Bertholdt. If he were to live like that, Bertholdt would eventually find out, and then Reinhardt would be in danger."

“…I see."

Charlotte was primarily concerned about my safety.

The fact that I saved Charlotte and the recent battle were not made known, possibly because if it were discovered that I saved her, Berthold might attempt to eliminate me.

Berthold probably does not know that I am in the palace.

"Does Berthold know about your condition?"

"He may not know the details, but he is aware that I won't live long."

It would be strange if Berthold was not aware of this situation.

There is no need to restrain an opponent who will fall apart on their own. Thus, the conflict between them had diminished recently.

However, I saved Charlotte's life. The person who was supposed to crumble on their own had been revived.

If this fact were known, I would be a dead man to Berthold.

That is why Charlotte made the rather bold decision to shelter me in her bedroom. It would be dangerous for me if Berthold found out I was here.

"But… At this point, the only one who can guarantee your safety is Reinhardt."

She had no choice but to admit that she could not protect Charlotte, and neither could the royal family.

There was no safe place for Charlotte anywhere in the world. Only with me by her side could Charlotte be safe.

"I must return to the temple, after all."

"…”

I cannot live in the royal palace.

In the end, the only choice left was for Charlotte to return to the temple and live in the dormitory with me.

Sabiolin Tana knew that this was the best choice for both me and Charlotte, and ultimately had no choice but to nod in agreement.

—---

It had only been one day.

Neither Tana nor Charlotte believed that just one uneventful day meant everything

would be fine moving forward.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes, Lady Tana."

"I must keep this a secret from everyone else, but I must report it to His Majesty."

"…"

"Putting aside my personal loyalty, this is the only way to convince him that your condition has improved. And for His Majesty to realize… that no further action is necessary."

Charlotte looked at me.

Her expression was full of apology. Sabiolin Tana was not Charlotte's person, but the Emperor's. Although she was responsible for the princess's safety, her ultimate allegiance lay with the Emperor.

The Emperor must not be kept in the dark about any secrets. After all, this too was necessary for Charlotte's sake.

Now, with matters so entangled, I, the prince of the demon realm, had reached a point where I would have to deal with the Emperor as well.

"It's alright."

"I will do my best to ensure that you are not put in danger. I swear it upon my honor."

The continent's strongest warrior swore an oath. She would risk her own life to ensure that I would not be put in danger due to this matter.

Her oath, staked on her honor, must have meant that.

"Not only did you save Her Highness, but you also saved my life."

She suddenly bowed her head.

"For that, I am truly grateful."

"Uh, well… There's no need to be so formal…"

Her bowed head conveyed sincere gratitude.

Lady Sabiolin Tana excused herself, promising to report the detailed circumstances to the emperor.

Charlotte and I were left alone in the bedroom. She skillfully brewed tea with a teapot, offering me a cup.

"I didn't think about Berthold when I brought you to the imperial palace. There was no need to."

Charlotte had thought she was going to die soon. Therefore, it wouldn't have mattered if Berthold found out that I had entered the Spring Palace. A rival whose value had vanished wouldn't be a concern, no matter who they were friends with.

"Reinhardt, to be frank, your saving me will likely have adverse effects on you."

Saving me was your mistake.

Charlotte stated this calmly. Seeing her sad smile, I furrowed my brow.

"We don't need that kind of talk."

"…"

"I'll do the same if something like this happens again."

At my words, Charlotte seemed flustered. I grinned as I looked at her, holding the teacup in her hand.

"I told you, it turned out just as I said."

I had told Charlotte that I would save her.

When she asked how, I said I would find a way.

She had responded pessimistically, saying anyone could say that.

But in the end, I saved Charlotte. She stared blankly at her teacup for a moment and then nodded slightly.

"You're right… I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

"From now on, just accept whatever I say. I'm never wrong. I'm always right."

Charlotte laughed heartily at my nonsense.

"Yes, I'll trust you. I'll continue to trust you."

I was taken aback by her unexpected response.

Charlotte sipped her tea, and I took a sip of the milk tea she had prepared.

"Anyway, Berthold will try to find a reason for my survival now. Even if he can't harm me directly, he'll be on guard again. So, you can't let him know you were at the Spring Palace. Fortunately, I erased your entrance records. Since very few people saw you, Berthold shouldn't know who was here or what happened."

"…That's a relief."

"So, you cannot leave the imperial palace."

Her words left me bewildered.

I mean, I thought I wasn't supposed to live in the Spring Palace. But saying I couldn't leave the palace meant I had to stay here, right?

Did she lie to Lady Sabiolin Tana?

As if she knew what I was thinking, Charlotte chuckled.

"Idiot, you know that place."

Charlotte gestured with her chin toward a wall in the bedroom.

The secret passage.

A warp gate was installed underground.

"You can leave through there, and it'll connect to a gate within the imperial capital. You can leave from there. You know the gates are heavily monitored for those coming in, but the surveillance for those leaving is lax, right?"

A secret path allowing me to leave the imperial palace unnoticed existed in Charlotte's bedroom.

"And this."

Charlotte went somewhere in the room and opened a magical vault, handing me something from within.

It was a small golden brooch.

"What is this?"

"The gates are bidirectional, aren't they?"

“…Right?"

"If you can leave, you can also enter, right?"

Charlotte showed me how to activate the brooch. It seemed to work by opening the brooch and pressing a switch-like mechanism.

"Activate this brooch and pass through any warp gate within the imperial capital, and you'll be connected to the warp gate in the underground of the Spring Palace."

"…”

Charlotte placed it in my hand and then held my hand.

Her hand trembled slightly.

"I'm giving you something that can enter my bedroom at any time… Unnoticed by anyone… Allowing entry…”

Charlotte's face was flushed, and her voice shook more intensely.

It was not an item she could give to just anyone.

No, had she ever given such an item to someone before?

This was nothing less than a secret key that allowed for undetected infiltration into the imperial palace.

"Do you understand the meaning of this…?"

Charlotte couldn't look me in the eye.

"You trust me that much?"

"…"

Charlotte stared at me intently.

Her lips pouted.

"Yes, I want you to come and help me whenever I need you."

Charlotte looked slightly miffed, crossing her arms and gazing out the window for a while.

Her face seemed as if it might drip crimson.

"Don't discard this gift…"

Charlotte said with a trembling voice. Was she thinking about what I said before I passed out?

Honestly, my consciousness was slipping away at that moment, so I couldn't remember exactly what I had said.

"Of course."

In exchange for discarding the gift that Charlotte had given me with a premonition of farewell, I received an item that allowed me to meet Charlotte at any time.

CHAPTER 273

The time when I awoke was around the afternoon.

The Temple was out of the question today as well.

Two consecutive days of absence.

Charlotte had already made up an excuse for my absence, so she told me not to worry.

She had also deleted my entry records.

Rather than being happy about her safety and the fact that the force trying to swallow her had subsided, Charlotte immediately thought about what she had to do next and proceeded with those tasks.

Abandoning everything, only to resume immediately as the situation changed.

It was quite a peculiar experience.

The people of the Spring Palace were tight-lipped, so my visit here would not be known to the outside world. That being said, I did not wander around the palace.

I remained solely in Charlotte's bedroom.

I nodded when Charlotte said it was fine to return and that she would go back to the Temple tomorrow.

"Still, I should keep an eye on you for one more day."

"…"

Charlotte stared at me intently.

"You mean, you'll stay in my bedroom for another day?"

"Yes."

"Reinhardt, I'm really grateful to you, and I acknowledge that you're a very precious person to me. But isn't this too brazen?"

Did you think this was your room just because you slept here for a day?

Charlotte seemed flabbergasted.

"Ah, it's unavoidable for the safety of your noble body."

"Why are you the one saying that!"

I confidently declared that I would sleep in her room and leave.

Even though it was for an important reason, it felt somewhat rascally.

But even if I went back to the Temple today, classes would have already ended. I wanted to watch over Charlotte's condition for another day.

If nothing happened today, it should be safe to assume everything would be fine for the time being.

Charlotte, realizing that my words made sense, did not kick me out. However, it was one thing when I had been injured and had no choice but to lie down in her bedroom, but now that I was being brazen, she found it unbelievable.

“…Fine. I'll sleep in the guest room, then."

"What do you mean by that?"

At Charlotte's words, I shook my head.

What is she trying to say?

"I'm staying here for another day to watch over your condition, but what's the point if I'm sleeping outside? I should sleep in here."

At my words, Charlotte's lips quivered. Her face was gradually turning pale.

"A-are… Are you saying that you'll sleep with me?"

No!

Why would it come to that!

"Do we really have to put it like that? I just need to make sure there's nothing wrong with you while you're asleep!"

"I-I… I understand that, but…"

Charlotte seemed to be trembling, as if she had never imagined she would be faced with such a request.

"What am I doing wrong? I'm just watching, right?"

"Why are you watching someone sleep without sleeping yourself!"

"So if I sleep, it's a problem, and if I don't, it's still a problem? What do you want me to do? You're a funny one, aren't you?"

"F-funny one…?"

Charlotte seemed to be mentally shaken by my blunt remarks.

Somehow.

Why do I have to hear this?

This reaction proves that both Harriet and Charlotte are of high quality. In fact, Charlotte must have grown up receiving even more venerable treatment.

Above all, Harriet had grown accustomed to the situation, and thus, she would usually let things slide. But Charlotte still lacked immunity, so her reactions were quite raw.

"Hey, that thing… give it back. You're scary."

Charlotte seemed to want the brooch she had given me back.

Perhaps she was worried that I might sneak in while she slept, check if she was alright, and then leave, doing something strange like that.

"Taking back what you've given is the worst thing to do, and do you think I would let you take it back?"

"No, don't! Give it back! Give it back! Ugh, I shouldn't have given it to you!"

Charlotte and I played tag in the spacious bedroom for quite some time.

Eventually, Charlotte grew tired and collapsed.

"Pant… gasp… pant… I-I… shouldn't have… exercised… and improved… my stamina…"

Exhausted, Charlotte glared at me as she sat down on the bedroom floor.

"Well, you should exercise too, then."

"You're the worst, really!"

Charlotte screamed as if she was truly annoyed.

To think there's someone who can provoke the princess.

Aside from Berthus, I might be the only one in the world.

In the end, I decided to stay another day, remaining in Charlotte's bedroom.

Charlotte seemed restless.

Well, even so, I would sleep on the sofa; did she really need to be so tense?

Indeed, having grown up in luxury, she must have never experienced a situation like this before.

Of course, the circumstances in the Demon King's Castle must have been much more horrifying, but that was different from this.

Servants brought our meals, and, naturally, I remained hidden. Charlotte told them she didn't need any assistance and asked for more food.

I had thought that after starving for a whole day, I could eat a lot, but instead, I ate less because of the hunger.

Charlotte looked at the remaining food and stared at me.

"Is it okay if I don't eat more?"

"You can't eat much when you're starving."

"Right."

Charlotte must have known that, too.

The luxurious feast at the Allied Forces' command post after a long period of starvation.

Charlotte's expression became slightly wistful and sad as she seemed to recall that time.

—---

After dinner.

Since I had only been in the bedroom, the night came without much to do.

Charlotte fidgeted like a puppy that needed to relieve itself. She seemed to want to do something, trying to stand up but then hesitating and sitting back down.

Why is she like this?

Eventually, Charlotte seemed to make up her mind and stood up.

"Um, I'm going to step out for a bit."

"Where to?"

"To another room…”

"I told you to sleep here, didn't I? Do you think I'll be here all the time? I just want to check on you today, okay?"

At my words, Charlotte glared at me.

"That's not it, I mean… I need to take a bath!"

Ah.

Is she feeling conscious because she wants to bathe in the bedroom and I'm watching?

"Why do you need to go to another room to take a bath?"

"You… you'll hear the sound of the water…"

Charlotte's face turned red.

What's going on?

How should I describe this sensitivity?

Is it really not okay for someone to hear the sound of her bathing?

Is that what a girl her age feels like? I don't really know.

Anyway, at a time when there are people who attend to one's bath, doesn't it not matter?

Was it natural for her to be so concerned?

I… I don't know…

I have no idea what's right or wrong in this case!

"…Well, I suppose it's not my place to tell you what to do. Figure it out on your own."

"I shouldn't be told what to do in the first place! Ugh!"

Annoyed, Charlotte stormed out of the bedroom.

As Charlotte went to bathe, I took the opportunity to wash myself in the en-suite bathroom.

It was quite spacious, but I didn't bother entering the tub.

After washing up, I realized something.

I had no change of clothes.

My school uniform, which was bloodstained and torn, had been discarded, and I was wearing something akin to pajamas that had been procured from somewhere.

Unable to leave the bathroom, I wondered what to do when, after a while, Charlotte returned.

Perhaps hearing the water, Charlotte's voice reached me from beyond the bathroom door.

"Are you, you're bathing in my bathroom?"

"Shouldn't I wash up?"

"Ugh, uh… um…"

Charlotte seemed to be stomping her feet, unsure if she was annoyed or something else.

Why can't I use it? I can't even leave your bedroom, after all.

"Anyway, I don't have a change of clothes."

"…Huh?"

"Bring me some clothes."

"…Huh?"

Charlotte seemed to have never imagined she would hear such a request, and for a while, there was no response.

Even so, isn't it a bit too much to ask the princess to fetch me clothes?

It's not even about her being a princess; it's just trashy to ask someone for clothes while using their bathroom.

As I was pondering this,

“…I've put them by the door."

Charlotte spoke in a voice that conveyed a mixture of complicated emotions.

—---

The palace was not just full of women's clothing.

Initially, when I had collapsed, Sabiolin Tana had managed to gather clothes for me to wear from somewhere.

After a bit of commotion,

Both Charlotte and I were dressed in our sleepwear.

…If anyone found out about this, it would be a huge scandal on its own. Regardless of the circumstances, it's a princess and a pauper sharing a room.

However, this was happening due to our unique situation.

I sat in a rocking chair in Charlotte's bedroom, while she lay on the bed.

“…Do you plan to sleep like that?"

"No?"

"Then, in… in the bed?"

Charlotte's voice was clearly flustered.

She seemed as if she would reluctantly give up her place if I insisted on sleeping in the bed.

"What's the big deal? Just the other day, we slept in the same bed and didn't even touch."

"That, that was just a figure of speech! It wasn't actually like that!"

Charlotte shouted, flustered.

But is it okay for her to be making so much noise?

The soundproofing is quite reliable. If it hadn't been for my supernatural abilities, I wouldn't have been able to eavesdrop on the conversations in the room.

The Charlotte of the day before had seemed to let go of everything.

That's why she talked to me about various things, shared important secrets, and even made off-the-cuff remarks.

Yet now free from danger, Charlotte began to feel embarrassed.

Perhaps it was because she could once again consider the notion of living.

That inexplicably warmed my heart.

"What's with that odd expression…?"

Charlotte, her face flushed, pulled the blanket up to cover half her face.

"Ah, anyway! Are you really going to sleep in the bed?"

Is it because she is of noble birth? She seems to be quite concerned about such things.

"I won't sleep."

“…Huh?"

"I'm here to make sure you're okay; how can I sleep? Don't worry. I won't stare at your face or do anything like that."

Sitting in a rocking chair with my arms crossed, I gazed blankly at the ceiling of

Charlotte's room.

What other intentions could I possibly have?

I just need to make sure you're safe.

I just need to know if nothing will happen from now on.

“…Aren't you tired?"

"I've consumed the treasure among treasures, the Elixir. It would be stranger if I weren't alright. Don't worry about it. Staying awake for a day is nothing."

I said this, hoping to make her feel a little less guilty by talking weirdly.

"Well, just… if you want to… you could sleep at the other end…”

"If I'm going to sleep, I'll sleep on the sofa, so don't worry about it."

"…”

For a while, Charlotte was silent.

However, perhaps to make room for me, she slid from the center of the bed to the very edge, leaving enough space for me to lie down on the opposite end.

By moving to the edge, she also moved closer to me, who was sitting quite a distance away in the rocking chair.

The chair was positioned not facing Charlotte, but rather, parallel to her.

I was sitting, and Charlotte was lying down.

We were side by side.

I was sitting next to Charlotte.

"Reinhardt."

"Hm?"

“…I don't understand. Why are you doing all this for me?"

"Nobility should be treated with respect. It's only natural, right?"

"You're not doing this just because I'm a princess."

"…”

There were many people who would give their lives for Charlotte simply because she was a princess.

But no matter how one looked at it, I didn't seem to be one of those people.

I wasn't trying to save her by risking my life just because of her status.

Why.

Why indeed.

Charlotte seemed curious.

"Just think of it as something like that."

Unable to explain the inexplicable, I had no choice but to say that.

I wasn't looking at Charlotte's face.

It seemed like she was looking at me.

As if making a decision, Charlotte cautiously opened her mouth.

"The Demon King… he did something to me."

“…Is that so?"

It must have been a long-held secret.

The moment such a thing was revealed, all she had would vanish, which was why she had kept it a secret until now. She wouldn't have been able to tell anyone.

Charlotte spoke of what I had only guessed at.

"I don't know what it was… but it was incredibly painful and terrifying. It felt as if not my body, but my soul was in agony."

"…"

Unable to simply empathize with Charlotte's words, I just listened for the moment.

“I cannot fathom what it was. Even now… I do not fully understand what has befallen me. However… after that, I was imprisoned in the dungeon-like depths of the Demon King's castle. Kidnapped… along with other people.”

“…”

Charlotte's voice quivered increasingly. It seemed as though she was attempting to disclose something she was afraid to discuss.

“Reinhardt.”

“Yes.”

“May I… hold your hand?”

I extended my hand, and Charlotte took hold of it.

Her palm was drenched in cold sweat.

Was it so agonizing to speak of it? What could have happened?

While grasping my hand, Charlotte took a breath and spoke.

“We starved for too long.”

“…”

“All of us there, for such a long time, we had to endure on scarce amounts of food and drink. And when the war escalated, they provided us with nothing.”

“…”

“People… for so long… had nothing to eat.”

“Charlotte.”

I looked intently at Charlotte.

Her eyes were already brimming with tears.

“If it is difficult to speak, you do not have to force yourself.”

“…”

“Actually, do not speak of it.”

“…”

“Stop. It is too painful for you.”

I could already understand what had happened from the mere mention of it.

From Charlotte's fear and horror, guilt-ridden voice, one could surmise the dreadful circumstances.

Those who were shattered to pieces by something formless.

Because I remembered that horrific scene.

I knew that now, Charlotte was trying to speak not of her cannibalism but of the events that transpired afterward.

As I told her not to speak, she burst into tears.

“Had it not been for me… if it were not me… everyone could have lived. All of them. If it were not for me. If I were not there… it was all because of me… my, mo… mother…”

Such words.

Charlotte had never spoken them to anyone before.

Even though everyone knew that she had suffered at the hands of the Demon King.

I felt that she was telling me this story for the first time.

Otherwise, she would not have confessed her guilt so sorrowfully, weeping as she told her story.

I did not offer any words of comfort, sympathy, or justification.

I merely held Charlotte's hand tightly.

“Hic! Sob! Sniff! Hic…”

Charlotte also tightly gripped my hand as she cried.

For a very long time.

—---

After calming down, Charlotte shared with me everything that had transpired.

There were two groups of people who knew about Charlotte's abilities.

Firstly, those who knew of her supernatural power to manipulate shadows.

Secondly, those who knew that her abilities were the result of the Demon King's torment.

The latter group consisted only of Dyrus, Sabiolin Tana, the Spring Palace Chamberlain, and the Emperor himself.

“What about Berthus?”

“I hope he doesn't know… but I think he does. It is likely that he has only recently discovered it.”

The power to control shadows is already sinister and eerie in itself. Thus, it can be easily twisted into something negative if one wishes.

Charlotte had been searching for a way to control or eliminate her power. That was why she sought out a seal master.

However, all her efforts were in vain, and as Charlotte's power grew, it began to consume her.

Somnambulism.

At some point, Charlotte started to find herself in strange places in the middle of the night.

"Could it be… that time?"

Only then did I recall the sight of Charlotte walking barefoot in the mansion's hallway during a group mission at midnight.

"That was the first time."

Charlotte's appearance had indeed seemed odd back then.

She said that there had been no incidents for a while after that.

But then, in the temple dormitory, Charlotte experienced another episode.

After the incident at the temple dormitory, Charlotte sensed that this was not an ordinary problem and started living in the Spring Palace.

The sleepwalking continued and became more frequent.

Eventually, she was said to have roamed the palace, engulfed in her powers and shrouded in darkness. Even then, it seemed alright.

Though she lost consciousness and couldn't remember anything, she didn't attack anyone, and when Dyrus and the chamberlain led her back to her bedroom, she didn't resist.

But at some point, she began to appear and disappear throughout the palace without ever opening any doors.

Then, one day, she attacked and killed a maid.

Charlotte could not remember anything.

But she felt that it was too late, and that everything had come to an end.

She asked the Emperor to just kill her.

But the Emperor refused.

Instead, he sent Sabiolin Tana to the Spring Palace and minimized the number of people in the palace.

Until they found a way to deal with the situation.

The royal family could not find a solution.

Although it's not certain, I believe that if I hadn't been there, Charlotte would not have returned after the day before yesterday. That day was the last moment.

Had it been after that day, Sabiolin Tana would have died, and Charlotte would have ultimately faced death by the Emperor's command.

In the end, if it hadn't been for me, Charlotte would have died just like that.

"Sleeping scared me."

"I can imagine."

"But even if I didn't sleep, I'd still lose consciousness. I knew that sleep wasn't the problem, but… I was just scared."

Charlotte's hand no longer conveyed the fear originating from cold sweat.

Only her warm body temperature was transmitted.

"Reinhardt."

"I'm listening."

"I think I can sleep properly for the first time in a long while."

With that, Charlotte closed her eyes.

"I'm glad."

All I could do was say those words.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah?"

"Can you tell me that nothing will happen?"

I look at Charlotte intently.

With the power of my declaration.

"Nothing will happen."

"Okay."

With her eyes closed, Charlotte nods her head.

"I'll believe that."

With a faint smile on her face, Charlotte gradually falls asleep.

I quietly listened to the steady sound of Charlotte's breathing.

I silently watched Charlotte's peaceful face as she slept.

And then.

[Special Achievement Unlocked - Turning Point in History]

[A major character who shouldn't exist in the original world line (Charlotte de Gradias) has survived.]

[The future has changed significantly.]

[You have gained 1,000 achievement points.]

The message appeared, exactly the same as it had during the prologue.

It seemed a bit late, but why was this message appearing now?

Shouldn't this message have appeared after the battle the night before last?

I gazed at the sleeping Charlotte's face. Holding my hand tightly, she slept with a serene expression.

Tonight.

It seemed there was some significance to me standing guard here until Charlotte could safely fall asleep.

Although I couldn't understand the meaning.

As long as nothing happened, I decided not to be curious about what could have occurred.

Nothing will happen.

You will be safe.

I will make sure of it.

With the power of self-suggestion.

With the power of my declaration.

In my heart, I continued.

I believed and declared countless times.

CHAPTER 274

The following day, I returned to the temple.

I had made a rather vague excuse, claiming I had been on a special mission under the instructions of Master Epinhauser.

Perhaps that was why neither Ellen nor Harriet were angry with me.

In truth, the recent events had been the most dangerous moments I had experienced in a while. I couldn't reveal the details, and ultimately, whether Ellen worried or not, I was the one seeking out danger.

I felt sorry.

But I couldn't avoid it, so my remorse grew even larger.

There would be many more such incidents in the future.

"What was the special mission?" Ellen asked.

I clicked my tongue briefly. "It wasn't so much a special mission… more of an excuse."

Had I caused trouble again?

Seeing Ellen's expression beginning to twist, I quickly shook my head. "It was related to Tiamata."

"Did you get caught?"

"Let's say…"

It was both true and false.

Charlotte and Sabiolin Tana knew that I had become the master of Tiamata.

Ultimately, I was lying, and I was terrified that Ellen would see through my

deception.

"We decided to keep it a secret. There should be no other problems."

“…Thank goodness."

Ellen stared intently at me.

"Were you worried?"

"Yes."

Upon seeing Ellen's calm demeanor as she spoke those words, a sharp pang tugged at my heart.

"It's fine, as long as nothing happened."

That was all Ellen had to say.

Charlotte said that since nothing happened that night, she would spend the weekend in the Imperial Palace and then return to the temple.

Charlotte and I were to return to the temple together, as Berthold might find it strange otherwise. It seemed that there would be no issues for a few days.

Charlotte's survival had been confirmed as a turning point in history. Although the duration of this effect was unknown, there should be no issues for the time being.

A newly-acquired ability. It could be said that the role of inspiration was immense.

It had been a stormy few days. Yesterday was Friday, so today was the weekend.

In the end, everything had passed without incident. Ellen grabbed my arm.

"You have something to do."

“…Huh? What do I have to do? Training?"

"No."

Ellen vehemently shook her head.

"Study."

What an unexpected remark.

"Kids are waiting."

Ellen dragged me off somewhere, gripping my arm.

She led me to the A-class dormitory's study room.

Liana, Harriet, and Adelia were huddled together there.

"Ah, the protagonist has arrived. How did your special mission go?" Liana greeted me with a nervous expression. Harriet glanced at me and, with a determined look, suddenly stood up, while Ellen pulled me along and made me sit down.

"What is this all about… Right after I came back?"

Harriet placed a notebook in front of me.

"These are the key points and expected questions for the upcoming final exams. Ellen, Adelia, and I worked on this together."

No.

What did she just say?

Harriet's eyes sparkled.

Come to think of it, there were only a few days left until the final exams.

"If you study this, you won't finish last," she assured me.

No.

My friends.

Why do you move me with such a gesture?

"We can't lose to Ludwig again. Understand?"

I didn't really need this.

However, the serious expressions of Ellen, Harriet, and Adelia left me unable to say that I didn't care about my exam scores.

My rival is Ludwig.

How far have I fallen…?

Sunday.

Winter Palace.

Berthus received a report and sat quietly in his office chair. It wasn't his usual frivolous smile, but a tense, expressionless face.

Berthus read the report without any expression.

The content was simple.

The protective measures for Charlotte de Gradias and the Spring Palace, ordered by the Emperor, had been lifted.

“…Didn't they say they couldn't control that ability?"

"Yes, Your Highness. We thought that was the case, and it was expected that actions would be taken against the First Princess soon…”

Berthus had been concerned about Charlotte's ability not long ago.

A supernatural power to control shadows.

It was rather peculiar that someone who had been imprisoned in the Demon King's Castle would obtain such a power.

Depending on how it was framed, Charlotte's power could be seen as a dark power,

and thus, it could be easily linked to a curse from the Demon King.

But there was no need to go that far.

There were some things that could not be covered up even if one tried.

The protective measures for the Spring Palace.

The news of Sabiolin Tana residing in the Spring Palace with minimal personnel.

The incident of a palace maid being murdered at midnight in the Spring Palace.

After considering various circumstances and deductions, Berthus had a hunch that Charlotte's end was not far off.

So, he left her be.

However, the lifting of the protective measures and the news of Charlotte's safety meant that somehow the matter had been resolved.

The rival he had expected to fall would rise again.

'Have I missed my chance?'

He should have taken advantage when the opportunity presented itself.

If the First Princess had successfully sealed the powers or something of the sort, the story of the cursed princess wouldn't have been convincing.

Moreover, it would have tarnished the imperial family's honor. The Emperor's wrath would be directed at him.

While a benevolent competition was impossible, the Emperor had desired it and commanded it.

He had the means to attack, but whether it was effective or not remained uncertain.

It was more likely to provoke the Emperor's displeasure.

'What on earth happened…?'

Leaving Charlotte alone had been an act of final mercy.

He hadn't been particularly keen on meddling with a dying princess. Pointlessly interfering might have only earned him baseless criticism.

If the situation was resolved, the battle would have to start anew.

How should he proceed?

"What about the Spring Palace's security?"

"It appears that it will be strengthened again."

"Hmm… It'll be difficult to obtain information now."

The once ironclad defenses would be reinforced again, making it even more challenging than before.

"Sabiolin Tana must have seen what happened…"

"She won't say a word."

"Yes, that's right."

It was the leader of Shanafel who heeded only the command of the Emperor. Sending her to the Spring Palace was an extraordinary event, for she had been striving to maintain perfect neutrality regarding the matter of imperial succession.

Had Charlotte's condition improved, she would have returned to neutrality.

"Investigate. Find out what happened. Whether the First Princess's condition has truly improved."

"Yes, Your Highness."

As the attendant withdrew, Berthus crossed his arms.

The downfall of his rival.

It seemed he should be in a foul mood now that it had been reversed.

Yet, strangely, Berthus didn't feel all that bad. Wasn't this a situation where he should be hitting the ground and hurling something in anger?

However, Berthus wore a smile.

'Hey, why the long face all the time? How unlucky.'

'What does it matter?'

'Well, it's even more unlucky when an already ugly face looks even more unhappy. Smile a little. Who's going to slap you for smiling?'

'Who dares to slap my cheek?'

'You always twist my words. You always hear them differently than I mean them.'

'You're the one who always speaks strangely, always starting quarrels.'

'Anyway, smile a little, will you? Your face is already unpleasant, and it gets worse when I see it.'

'Ah, you're truly annoying. If I smile, will you leave me be?'

'I don't know about leaving, but I might think of you as a little less unlucky.'

Berthus, who had rarely smiled, who hadn't smiled much since his mother's passing, tried on an awkward smile at that time.

'Well, that's a little better. Still unlucky, though.'

'What do you want me to do?'

He had exchanged such conversations when he was very young. He couldn't even remember how old he was then.

It was when he didn't despise his half-sibling as much as he did now.

It was when he didn't fully understand their relationship.

Just a cheeky fellow, that was Charlotte to Berthus, and he too was such a fellow to

Charlotte.

The two were irreconcilable.

If one existed, the other should not.

He would have to fight the battle he thought had ended once again.

And that was a delightful prospect.

Berthus thought so as he quietly smiled in his office.

Name: Valier

Age: 17

Current stats: [Strength 10.2(C)] [Agility 9.9(C-)] [Dexterity 11.9(C)] [Magic 14.2(B-)] [Stamina 15.2(B-)]

Race: Arcdemon

Talent: Psychokinesis-Self Hypnosis, Psychokinesis-Word Magic, Magic Sensitivity, Magic Control

Traits:

[Sacred Mind] - Increased resistance to mental magic

[Hero's Bloodline] - Significantly increased growth limit, increased growth rate

[Sixth Sense] - Crisis detection

Abilities:

[Demon Control B] (Arcdemon unique ability) (Currently unusable in this state)

[Self Hypnosis A]

[Word Magic F]

[Magic Enhancement D]

Overall Ability Evaluation - Intermediate Demon King

Battle Level Evaluation - A

It had been a while since he last checked his status, and the increase was quite significant.

Influenced by the Hero's Bloodline, he could feel that the speed of his status increase had accelerated considerably.

His battle level was now ranked A.

It felt like just yesterday when he was at rank F, and he had come a long way since then.

Magic Enhancement had also become possible, and Self-Hypnosis had reached Rank A. Although it was the lowest rank, the power of Word Magic had awakened as well.

Interestingly, it was not that Self-Hypnosis had evolved into Word Magic, but rather that an additional psychic power had emerged.

A battle level of Rank A would now mean that I had nothing to fear when compared to others.

At some point, Demon Control had risen from Rank C to Rank B.

Rank F Word Magic.

I had reported this only to Master Epinhauser, and I was not sure whether he had fully understood the details, but we had agreed to keep it a secret.

It would probably be revealed during a physical scan, but Master Epinhauser would keep the secret.

As expected, even upon hearing that I had awakened a very powerful psychic ability called Word Magic, he merely said, "Is that so?"

I still do not know the extent of its usage. I have not had the leisure to experiment with it on my own.

Because I had to study for the final exams, forcibly entangled in the children's affairs.

The children did not know what had happened, and Word Magic was kept a secret from them.

The newly awakened power, Word Magic.

And the new information about Tiamata's usage.

It responds to my anger.

It was fortunate to have saved Charlotte, but ultimately, it was also necessary for myself.

"Reinhardt."

"Ah, Charlotte."

Charlotte returned on Monday morning.

Judging by her expression, nothing seemed to have happened while she was alone.

The shadow that always seemed to linger on Charlotte's face appeared to have been lifted.

I was tempted to ask Eleris about it, but I had decided not to speak of it.

If she knew that it was a trace of the Demon King, Eleris might try to intervene.

Sarkegaar would try to revive it, and Eleris would try to eradicate it.

Of course, there is a possibility that Eleris would not act upon my persuasion, but it is unlikely that Eleris could do anything that even the royal magicians could not.

I am the only one who can control Charlotte's power. The fewer people who know, the better.

And for now, it is difficult to leave the temple.

Due to the pressure from Harriet and Ellen to focus on our studies and not to sneak out.

As there seems to be no imminent threat to Charlotte's safety, I intend to observe the situation.

Having overcome the crisis with Charlotte, I now had to think about the next issue.

The revolutionary forces.

I had to think about what to do with them.

The royal family, the emperor, and even Charlotte's rival, Berthus, were all focused on the issue of Charlotte's death, and they seemed to have failed to grasp the revolutionary forces.

If left unaddressed, civil war or rebellion may break out in the empire, and if the Gate incident occurs, it could be the final blow to the staggering empire.

Without a doubt, the revolutionary forces must be eliminated.

But how to accomplish this?

Sarkegaar, who is responsible for infiltration and intelligence gathering, believes that I intend to use the revolutionaries to cause chaos in the empire and rebuild the demon world.

Hence, it was not possible to order Sarkegaar to eliminate all of their chieftains.

If I were to give information to Charlotte or Berthus, I would have no means to explain how I had come to know it.

The most plausible method that comes to mind is to claim that I learned it through the Thieves Guild.

However, the actual source of the information is not the Thieves Guild. If one were to investigate the Thieves Guild, it would be easy to discover that the source is false.

Charlotte's trust in me is stronger than Berthus's, so I wonder if it would be acceptable to simply say that I have such information without providing an explanation.

Time passed, but I struggled to make a decision.

I did not wish to influence the future succession structure.

To be precise, I did not want to take Charlotte's side and make an enemy of Berthus, nor did I want to support Berthus and bring about Charlotte's downfall.

It was not something that could be decided easily.

Amidst the many issues that lay scattered, time as a student continued to pass at the temple.

The final exams were just around the corner.

On Monday, apart from Charlotte's return, there were other changes.

It was presumed that Charlotte's current abilities had overcome the crisis.

This was only an 'assumption.'

Therefore, the royal family, or to be precise, the Emperor seemed to have not only allowed Charlotte to return to the temple but also thought of safety measures, naturally.

On Monday morning, before classes began, the first-year Royal Class students were briefly gathered at the dormitory.

Teachers Epinhauser and Mustlang introduced someone to us.

"Starting today, Lady Sabiolin Tana will be serving as the Royal Class first-year supervisor, responsible for your daily safety and dormitory discipline."

"Nice to meet you. I am Sabiolin Tana, entrusted with your daily safety and the discipline of your dormitory life."

Thus, Sabiolin Tana unexpectedly began to reside in the Royal Class dormitory.

CHAPTER 275

Charlotte's power was safe for now, but no one knew when it might become dangerous.

Moreover, although Sabiolin Tana was in poor condition, she had managed to handle the situation.

To prepare for any possible scenarios, the royal family dispatched Sabiolin Tana, who would take action if Charlotte’s power went out of control.

The reason she stayed at the dormitory rather than the Spring Palace was likely due to another hidden purpose.

It was me.

Charlotte staying at the dormitory allowed me to intervene in case of an emergency and ensured that my identity remained concealed.

Of course, being a dormitory supervisor was not a terrible job, but it was strange for someone to suddenly become a Temple supervisor after serving as the Empire's First Knight Commander.

It was the Emperor's decision to ensure the safety of the First Princess and to deal with her potential rampage.

Those who knew the situation.

Berthus and Charlotte seemed to have anticipated this, and I thought this response was appropriate, albeit unexpected.

The role of the First Knight Commander was significant, but the safety of the First Princess was such a critical issue that she had to temporarily step down from her position.

-Commander Shanafel…?

-Why on earth?

Those who knew about Sabiolin Tana were undoubtedly confused. Everyone seemed unable to understand the situation.

Who could easily accept this situation? If one didn't know the circumstances, it would seem like a bizarre April Fool's joke.

Except for Ellen Artorius, who wore a blank expression as if thinking, 'I should have eaten more breakfast.'

Sabiolin Tana, standing between Ephinhauser and Mustlang, had removed her Knight Commander uniform and donned a two-piece suit.

"Addressing me as 'teacher' will suffice. Moreover, if needed, I can supervise your personal training as well."

Those interested in receiving training from the world's strongest person began to sparkle with excitement.

A prime example was Ludwig, who seemed ecstatic, though he knew little else.

Originally, there wasn't a supervisor for each grade. Supervisors were assigned without grade distinction, and they took turns on duty and patrolling.

However, Sabiolin Tana became a unique supervisor, responsible only for the first-year students.

Naturally, her primary concern would be Class B, where Charlotte was, so she likely paid little attention to Class A.

The newly introduced supervisor aside.

The final exam period had begun.

After Monday's comprehensive exam, many students chatted in their free time.

"Aren't you looking forward to the festival?"

Of course, someone like Kono Lint seemed to be solely focused on enjoying the

festival.

"I've only heard about the festival, but what exactly do we do?"

It was Erich who replied.

"There's a beauty pageant!"

…Well, if you say so.

He seems to think that alone makes the festival incredibly valuable.

The official names are Miss Temple and Mister Temple.

There's also a cross-dressing contest.

The final exams were supposed to take place, but due to the counteroffensive, various practices kept everyone busy, and the Orvis class was closed down.

I know the student council is trying their best to make it happen.

As for the Royal class, there's not much to prepare, and they can just enjoy the festival.

"Reinhardt."

"Huh, what?"

Kono Lint, excited, spoke to me.

"Aren't you participating in the tournament?"

"Tournament?"

"Yeah, well… you could make it into the rankings, right? They're accepting applications starting today."

Although the counteroffensive was canceled, a tournament targeting the entire Temple would still take place.

There are tournaments for each grade, and an unlimited tournament regardless of grade.

I originally didn't plan on participating since I didn't have much chance of winning first place.

[(Festival) Unlimited Tournament Victory - 15,000 points]

[(Festival) First Grade Tournament Victory - 10,000 points]

However, the rewards from the challenge are substantial.

The possibility of the Orvis class participating is low since they were closed down, and even if they do, I've awakened the ability to strengthen magic through self-suggestion.

Self-suggestion with magical enhancement.

In reality, no one can beat me in my current state, excluding Ellen. Of course, this assumes that the magic enhancement will work properly in the tournament.

My ability is especially useful in real combat, but will I be able to use magic enhancement in a practice duel like the tournament?

It did work right away when I tried it in the palace of spring.

Ellen had said last time that she would not participate, as her victory appeared all too certain.

Exams were of course important as well.

It seemed only right to participate in the tournament.

Aside from the achievement points, winning the tournament would also grant one a trophy and a monetary reward bestowed by the emperor.

"Hmm, perhaps I should give it a try."

The hopeless trio gazes at me.

For some time now, they have been looking at me with awe.

Naturally, there was another person from whom I needed confirmation.

"Hey."

"?"

I approached Ellen, who was seated in the front row.

"I'm going to participate in the first-year tournament."

"Alright."

"Don't you participate."

"Alright."

Ellen coolly nods her head.

Does this guarantee my victory?

The gaze of the hopeless trio shifts.

That rascal, he's fixing the match.

That was the look in their eyes. But if Ellen participates, I can't win even if I were to die and come back to life!

I don't need second or third place! If it's not victory, there's nothing for me to gain! What's a few coins worth of prize money! I must somehow block this variable?

With a single word, I managed to hinder the participation of a powerful contender for victory.

It seems somewhat like cheating…

Ellen stares intently at me and then says dismissively,

"If you don't win, you'll be scolded."

"No! You said I should only make it to the quarterfinals last time!"

"The situation has changed."

It seems that Ellen's expectations of me have risen significantly.

The unnecessary success of my magical enhancement…

My unexpected declaration of participation.

The most powerful rivals from the Orvis class should have scattered and been reassigned to the general classes.

I don't know if they will participate or not.

However, as long as Ellen isn't present, my status as a strong contender for victory remains unchanged.

It has suddenly come to this.

“But, is there no one from our class participating in Miss Temple?”

“You little brat.”

“If you're going to whisper, do it quietly; we can hear you.”

Harriet and Liana threw disdainful looks at Kono Lint.

“You should be aware that you're a nuisance to us in a different way.”

"Ah, no! I, I was just… I thought everyone was worthy of participating…”

“Why don't you just keep your mouth shut?”

-Bang!

"Reinhardt!"

And then,

Olivia Lanze suddenly bursts through the first-year classroom door.

Why is she here instead of studying during exam period? Unfazed by everyone's surprise at her sudden entrance, Olivia quickly rushes towards me.

She then thrusts a piece of paper at me. My face pales as I read the content.

[Miss Temple Participation Application]

It was clearly written.

"I'm going to participate in Miss Temple!"

“…What is that?"

"You're going to vote for me, right?"

Miss Temple participation application.

What is this person thinking, wanting to participate in such a thing?

"Ah, ah! Why are you clinging to me whether you participate or not!"

What am I supposed to do about it when you tell me? I fended her off with disgust as she tried to grab my face and rub it.

This cannot be.

The children's gazes grew strange again.

Now it was even happening in the classroom.

That was the feeling.

As I forcibly pulled myself away, Olivia glanced around the quiet classroom.

"Heh, it seems like there are no competitors here for me."

"…”

"…"

"…"

Liana, Ellen, and Harriet's expressions turned grim.

Why did she suddenly pick a fight? That was the look on their faces.

No, why did she come here to attract attention all of a sudden? Olivia laughed at her classmates, whose expressions grew darker because of her over-the-line remarks.

Then, she suddenly walked somewhere.

To the front row.

Beside Ellen.

"Are you not participating?"

Taken aback by the sudden provocation, Ellen glared at Olivia.

"Why would I participate in something like that?"

As Olivia covered her mouth and looked down at Ellen, she said:

“…Because you think you'll lose?"

"What?"

"Without even looking, you think you'll lose?"

No! Why do you always do this to someone who's just minding their own business?

Leave her alone!

I felt like slapping the back of Olivia's head as she grinned. As I was about to step in and say something.

An accident occurred.

-Whack!

"Ouch!"

Ellen stood up and grabbed Olivia's collar.

The expressions of the children watching this scene turned to shock, and I was no different.

She's lost it.

With a hardened, ferocious expression, Ellen held Olivia's collar and glared at her.

"I don't know why you've been treating me like this, but get lost. I don't want to deal with you."

"Are you going to… hit your… senior?"

As I thought Ellen might start a fight, something unexpected happened.

-Grrrrrrrrrr!

"!"

"Remember… there's always… someone better… in this world…?"

Smiling brightly, Olivia gripped the wrist of Ellen, who had grabbed her collar.

With no signs of struggle.

Olivia forced Ellen's hand, which had been gripping her collar, to open just with her grip strength.

Ellen, the strongest first-year student and recognized as a monstrous outlier among us.

No matter how much older Olivia was, everyone was shocked to see Ellen being overpowered. Olivia, who had removed Ellen's hand, straightened her clothes and grinned.

-Boop!

With her index finger, Olivia poked Ellen's surprised forehead.

"I know you're confident, but there will always be someone better than you. Keep that in mind, okay?"

"…"

Ellen stared at Olivia with wide eyes.

"Why don't we compete in the Unlimited Tournament if it's not the beauty pageant? I'm confident I can win both Miss Temple and the tournament."

Olivia looked at me, leaving Ellen, who had lost her wits, behind.

-Wink

Olivia winked at me and left the classroom.

Ellen stared blankly at the door through which Olivia had left. Everyone alternated between looking at the dumbfounded Ellen and me.

-I've been envious of her…

-She will never die in disgrace…

Erich and Kaiyer muttered quietly.

Kono Lint patted my shoulder.

"Well… Cheer up."

Who would have thought that there would come a day when I would receive sympathy from this kid?

No matter how strong I've become, I still don't dare to face Ellen.

And then there's Olivia Lanze, who might be stronger than Ellen, at least in terms of raw power.

It seemed like everyone imagined that I would eventually be crushed between these extraordinary individuals, like a shrimp's back snapping.

Anyway…

Sister.

Let's see.

I've been defeated.

—---

A short while later.

"I told you to stop bothering her when she's minding her own business!"

"I-I'm sorry! I won't do it again!"

In the end, I stormed up to the fifth-year classroom, and my temper erupted as I raged at Olivia.

"Do you really want to be knocked down? Huh? Show me? Do you want me to show you?"

"Reinhardt! I went too far! Yeah! I'll apologize! Is it okay if I apologize to her?"

"I said just leave her alone! Do you always want to act like you're not worth anything? Huh?"

"Yes! I'll leave her alone!"

The situation was the same, only the grade level was different.

All the other fifth-year seniors stared blankly as their seemingly distant junior grabbed their fellow senior like catching a rat.

In the end, I made Olivia cry and beg profusely.

Not knowing she would actually cry, I couldn't help but feel a little taken aback.

CHAPTER 276

After completing their Monday exams, the female students of Class A did not return to their dormitory. Instead, they gathered at a café near the classroom building.

Although it would have been proper to return to the dormitory and study, they were all deeply agitated.

"I think she's truly mad."

Surprisingly, it was Adelia who spoke those words.

Not expecting the usually timid Adelia to say something like that, Liana, Harriet, and even Ellen stared at her with their mouths agape.

"Ah, um… Was that too harsh…?"

Adelia wondered if she had used too strong a word, her face turning red as she scratched her cheek.

Liana sipped her lemonade through a straw and shook her head.

"You're not wrong. You did well, Adelia. But why would Miss Temple go to a first-year classroom? What does she want us to do? And what? She has no rivals? It's so absurd."

Liana used even stronger words. Harriet crossed her arms and frowned.

“…I really don't like her."

Harriet stuffed a mouthful of mocha sand into her mouth and grumbled.

Lately, she had been picking fights with Ellen over trivial matters, and today was no exception.

It was rare for the ever-calm Ellen to genuinely dislike someone.

Moreover, Ellen's overpowering presence was enough to fluster everyone.

Among their classmates, Ellen had become something transcending grade levels.

There were only two in the royal class of the first year who received such treatment.

Ellen and Reinhardt.

Ellen was Ellen.

Reinhardt was Reinhardt.

Both had something unique about them that inadvertently led to this treatment. Of course, in Reinhardt's case, it wasn't a good thing.

No matter how much of a fifth-year the opponent was, Ellen was still Ellen. That fifth-year senior actually overpowered Ellen.

Everyone was shocked by this.

Liana tilted her head.

"But does that girl really like Reinhardt?"

A sudden doubt.

At those words, Harriet and Ellen stared intently at Liana.

"Do I think she likes him…? If not, there's no reason for her to act like this, right?"

Adelia hesitantly expressed her opinion while subtly glancing at Harriet.

"No, at this point, I wonder if she's just having fun tormenting him. Honestly, what good does it do for her?"

That was true.

Although it might look cute from some perspectives, today's actions were not much different from needlessly picking a fight.

It wouldn't be good for Reinhardt or for her.

"Tormenting?"

The one who reacted to that word was Ellen.

"I thought Reinhardt might actually like it, but as I watched, I could see he truly dislikes it. If that girl really likes Reinhardt, shouldn't she stop when he says he doesn't like it once or twice?"

Now that they thought about it, that seemed true.

What reason could there be for someone to continuously engage in behavior that the person they care for despises? It is true that Reinhardt has persistently asked Olivia Lanze to cease her actions whenever he witnesses them.

Ellen had her doubts as well, but after hearing Liana's words, she felt they were accurate.

Olivia Lanze continues to engage in behavior that Reinhardt detests.

Moreover, Ellen knows circumstances others are unaware of.

Olivia had purified the cursed Tiamata, making her a life-saving benefactor to Reinhardt.

Thus, Ellen knows that Reinhardt cannot be excessively cruel to Olivia.

And Olivia exploits this, continually tormenting Reinhardt.

Whether her feelings for him are genuine or not.

It is true that Olivia torments Reinhardt.

"……"

No matter how much Ellen thinks about it.

Olivia Lanze cannot be left unchecked.

Although she has already been pushed away once, and she might suffer a terrible fate.

Ellen had no intention of hesitating.

Ellen did not harbor grave thoughts when she directed herself towards the fifth-year dormitory.

What she wanted to say was simple and not difficult.

She had no intention of fighting, not because of her reliance on her strength, but because of her shame at having rashly thrown a punch in the classroom, regardless of the outcome.

She had no intention of fighting.

Her message was singular.

Stop tormenting Reinhardt.

Why do you keep doing this while he's struggling?

She intended to say that. After returning to the dormitory, Ellen ventured alone to the fifth-year dormitory.

She called for Olivia Lanze, and everything was fine when the senior appeared with her usual carefree grin.

Even when she wore an expression that seemed to provoke her, inviting Ellen to say anything, the atmosphere was not unpleasant.

Ellen's request was straightforward.

Stop tormenting Reinhardt.

Continuing to act in such a manner despite being told multiple times that it is unwelcome is rude.

Please restrain yourself.

Ellen said this. Upon hearing these words, Olivia Lanze tilted her head.

"Ha ha… I already got an earful from Reinhardt…"

Olivia Lanze laughed hollowly.

Did Reinhardt already say something? No wonder he seemed to leave the classroom a bit early.

"Did Reinhardt ask you to speak to me on his behalf?"

"…No."

"Really? Then why are you advocating for Reinhardt's position?"

Olivia's smile suddenly turned cold.

Her expression was that of someone who had just heard a decisive word that twisted her mood in an already unpleasant situation.

"What are you to Reinhardt?"

"…What?"

Olivia approached Ellen.

Ellen did not back down but stared at Olivia with a stern expression.

"What are you to Reinhardt? As if Reinhardt belongs to you alone. Telling me to stop tormenting your Reinhardt."

"…"

"How disgusting. To hear such words from a third party."

Olivia glared at Ellen with cold eyes.

A third party.

Those words struck a chord in Ellen's heart.

Moreover, Olivia had spoken such words more frequently.

"Please take good care of our Reinhardt!"

"You shouldn't be too close to Reinhardt, you know why, right?"

"You're good at fighting, aren't you? Still, don't be too harsh on our Reinhardt."

She had spoken as if Reinhardt was hers alone. Ellen stared back at Olivia and said, "You did the same, senior."

"Yes, I did," Olivia smiled.

"I did that because I wanted Reinhardt to be mine. Is that what you want too?"

"…"

Ellen couldn't say anything.

Did she wish for Reinhardt to be hers alone?

She hadn't given deep thought to such concerns. She feared that reaching an unwanted conclusion would set off an irreversible chain of events. Olivia continued to look coldly at the silent Ellen.

"Why can't you say anything? Can't you even tell me how you feel?"

"…"

"I asked what Reinhardt is to you."

"…A friend…"

"Is that all?"

"…"

Ellen couldn't respond.

The moment she gave an answer, it seemed everything would end.

Fearing that the unpredictable senior before her, spouting strange words, might destroy all her relationships, Ellen hesitated.

In the end, Ellen couldn't say anything.

"If you're nothing more than friends, and you have no intention of being more than that with Reinhardt, you have no right to tell me anything, do you?"

"…"

"Exactly. You're just friends, but you tell me not to approach Reinhardt."

Olivia seemed to be interrogating her.

As if forcibly opening a heart that no one had tried to open before.

"Isn't that a bit strange?"

It was similar to something Harriet had once said to her.

"You don't want to lose anything, but you hate being taken away even more. You want to hold onto everything awkwardly?"

Olivia smiled as she cautiously placed a hand on Ellen's shoulder.

It wasn't the usual frivolous and gentle smile, but a clear sneer.

"You're truly selfish."

Not making a choice is also a choice.

Deferring all answers to the future and doing nothing is still a choice, leading to certain outcomes.

It leads to the destruction of everything.

Am I selfish?

Ellen felt as if she had been struck in the head by Olivia's words.

Why does this person hate me so much?

What does she want from me by shaking me up like this?

The person once called the saint of Eredian was nothing more than a hateful person to Ellen.

Why does this person hate me?

She hadn't known until now, but it seemed she did.

She knew she was selfish and that her actions were wrong, but there was a stronger desire within her.

She didn't want to lose him, at least not to this person.

She would hold onto Reinhardt and never give him back.

It was then that Ellen seemed to understand why Olivia disliked her so much.

The reason was the same as why she herself disliked Olivia.

For fear of being robbed.

And so, it was hateful.

As soon as Ellen realized her own feelings, she came to understand the emotions hiding within Olivia's cold gaze.

In those eyes was a certain…

Fear.

"Are you afraid of me?"

“…What?"

Just as Ellen feared that the person before her might take Reinhardt away, the other

person was also afraid.

And that's why she was needlessly picking fights, shaking things up, and scratching at them.

Olivia's expression twisted at Ellen's sudden words.

"Why would I be afraid of you?"

The loss of composure in her face due to the sudden provocation already revealed much.

Ellen knew she had hit the mark. Now that she realized the other person didn't hate her but was afraid, she naturally understood.

That she had been oversensitive.

"You'll be graduating next year."

Time was no longer on Olivia's side. Olivia licked her lips, seemingly flustered by Ellen's words.

“…I, I'm going to graduate school?"

"Still, you'll have to leave the dormitory."

"…”

Starting the year after next, she wouldn't have to see that annoying face again.

On the other hand, both Ellen and Reinhardt would continue to stay in the dormitory.

That was what the other person disliked.

There was no need for her to be angry. There was no need to take the other person's agitation seriously.

Reinhardt could only be by my side longer, not by yours.

There was no need to fight. Why fight when the victory was already hers?

The other person wanted to make her look ugly. There was no need to join in on such antics.

The other person would dislike her and would be jealous.

She didn't know what the other person wanted her to admit, but there was no need to oblige.

"A year is a long time, you know?"

As if searching for something to say, Olivia gritted her teeth, and finally spoke in a trembling voice.

"Yes. Give it your best shot."

Ellen looked at Olivia with one corner of her mouth raised.

She felt like she was doing something very wicked.

But it was satisfying.

It felt like she was finally getting back at someone who had always been putting her down. No, it wasn't just about getting back at her; it was about realizing that her opponent was fighting an overwhelmingly losing battle from the beginning.

In the end, Olivia lost her composure, and her eyes reddened.

She looked at Ellen with gritted teeth.

She seemed angry.

She knew that no matter how much she scratched with words, there was an insurmountable gap that she could never close.

What would have happened if Olivia Lanze had been a classmate?

She couldn't know about anything else, but she wouldn't have been able to look at Olivia with this kind of condescending sneer.

But speculations were meaningless.

In the end, even if Reinhardt spent time with Olivia, he was always closer to Ellen.

That wouldn't change.

"You, you… If you're in the same class as Reinhardt, you think you know everything?"

"Yes, indeed."

A position you can never enter.

A position that would make you the most envious.

Feeling that she already possessed what Olivia desired, Ellen saw no need to be angry with her.

It was simply jealousy, envy that drove Olivia.

At Ellen's brazen acknowledgment, Olivia glared at her, biting her lip.

"It would have been better if you were born a little later."

With a snicker, Ellen left Olivia behind, brushing past her.

"You, you… Really! You're just… so wicked…"

Olivia pursed her lips, staring at the retreating figure of Ellen.

As Ellen disappeared from view, Olivia's eyes reddened, her lips quivering as she murmured.

"Damn… I shouldn't have provoked her… I didn't even get my own back…"

So angry was Olivia, tears welled up in her eyes.

Although she wondered why she had to engage in such emotional battles, Ellen felt a kind of exhilaration she had never experienced before. She wouldn't have felt this way even if she had punched Olivia.

"It would have been better if you were born a little later."

Olivia's expression upon hearing that was truly worth seeing. Ellen felt as if she had repaid all of Olivia's previous taunts in one go, and from now on, she wouldn't care about whatever Olivia said to her.

Now that she knew why Olivia had been taunting her for no reason, it no longer bothered her.

Olivia was jealous, and she could never have what Ellen had. She was furious and frustrated, picking fights for no reason.

Upon returning to the dormitory, Ellen felt light-footed as she walked down the corridor and ran into someone.

"Ellen, what good has happened to you?"

"Ah, well… nothing, really."

Upon seeing Harriet, Ellen's good mood dissipated.

Selfish.

That's what Olivia had said.

Not wanting to let go of Harriet nor Reinhardt, Ellen tried to awkwardly hold onto both of them.

So, you are selfish.

Olivia's words came back to life in her mind.

She wanted to ignore it, but she wasn't foolish enough not to understand the meaning behind those words.

Harriet liked Reinhardt.

Though she didn't want to think about it, she knew that it was quite possible. Reinhardt was always attentive to Harriet.

If Reinhardt were to fall for Harriet…

What would she do?

She didn't want to lose him to Olivia.

Similarly…

She didn't want to lose him to Harriet either.

The thought was too frightening.

"What's wrong, Ellen?"

Harriet asked kindly, tilting her head as if to inquire if something was hurting.

“…No, nothing. I'm just a bit tired."

"I'm going to study with Reinhardt. Are you going to rest then?"

It seemed Harriet was holding a stack of textbooks in her arms.

She was going to study for an exam. More precisely, she was going to help Reinhardt study.

"What about the others?"

"They said they'll be studying their own subjects, so if you don't come, it'll probably just be me and Reinhardt."

In that case, they would be alone together.

"I'll go, too."

"Alright, bring your books and join us."

"Okay."

As Harriet walked toward the study room, Ellen watched her retreating figure.

Ellen had thought Olivia's words would have no effect on her.

Yet, when she thought of Reinhardt alone with a friend, she felt an unpleasant emotion stirring within her chest.

'What should I… '

Ellen bit her lip as she watched Harriet walking away.

'What should I do… '

She realized that she was already preparing herself to resent her friend.

Ellen's footsteps, as she returned to her room to fetch her textbooks, were heavy.

CHAPTER 277

Olivia Lanze stood within the training grounds.

"Will you not learn the sword any further?"

"Yes, Father."

"Why is that?"

"Even if I don't intend to use it in such a manner, I don't want to learn a skill that could harm others."

"…"

She knew such words were meaningless.

She had long known that she had already learned as much as she could. By her third year, she had been told that there was nothing more to learn.

Yet, Olivia Lanze was afraid of becoming more proficient in violence. She feared that injuring others would become increasingly easy for her. Olivia distanced herself from violence and the potential for it.

But now, Olivia held a sword in her hand.

Controlling the power coursing through her body was an endeavor she had not undertaken in a long time, yet it was all too easy.

Now, Olivia intended to participate in a tournament.

An unrestricted-class tournament.

And Miss Temple.

Miss Temple and the unrestricted-class tournament were never of interest to her.

It didn't matter whether the irritating first-year, Ellen, participated or not.

"Miss Olivia, you don't have to push yourself like this anymore."

“…No, it's fine. I still have some leeway."

"I know your situation. Even if our facility's budget is lacking, you're still a student."

One thing was certain.

Money.

Money was needed.

Countless war orphans resulted from the Demon World War.

Just as the nation could not alleviate poverty, the Empire could not support all the numerous war orphans.

There were gaps, and children lacking food and clothing were scattered throughout the land. Olivia had been supporting them since her volunteer work during the Demon World War.

However, now that her status as the daughter of a Holy Knight had disappeared, Olivia's ability to support them was dwindling.

Olivia could not abandon them. Though she had forsaken her faith, she had not forsaken those children.

“If Reinhardt knew, he'd surely have a lot to say.”

She couldn't tell Reinhardt, knowing he would scold her for engaging in such foolish endeavors.

The prize money from the tournament and Miss Temple was substantial. With that money, the facilities she supported could sustain themselves for a while.

She knew that a policy to support war orphans would soon be announced. She only needed to provide food and clothing for them for a short while with her own hands.

That was all.

And so, Olivia Lanze held the sword.

"Has it been a year…?"

She had put down the sword in her third year.

However, there had been an unavoidable occasion when she had to pick it up again.

In Darkland, where she had gone under the guise of volunteering, she could not simply render aid.

There had been times when she was both disillusioned and grateful for the power she possessed.

Since then, she had put it down.

Though she was confident in her victory, she did not think it would be easy.

She would have to put in the effort to regain her skills. At the moment she tried to calm her heart and draw out her power.

"If only you were born a little later."

Swoosh

"Ah, seriously!"

Clang!

Startled, Olivia Lanze suddenly threw her sword.

What was happening?

With her face flushed, Olivia spent some time alone in the training hall, panting.

In the meantime, the door of the training hall opened, and someone entered.

Thump

"Olivia, so you were here."

Whether she was looking for Olivia or not, the newcomer approached her with a bright smile.

"Ah, yes, Radia."

While Olivia's behavior might be strange to first-year students, she was still kind and gentle to those in the fifth and sixth years.

The person who had come to find her was a sixth-year student, Radia Schmitt from class B-2. She approached Olivia with a lively smile.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you with a sword. So you're participating in the Unrestricted Tournament?"

"Ah… Yes, that's the plan."

"I see… That's unfortunate. I thought I might have a chance at winning this time."

"You're participating too, Radia?"

"Ah, you didn't know? This is my last chance. Windsor is also participating."

"Ah… I see."

For sixth-year students, graduation is practically upon them.

It's understandable that they would want to participate in the Unrestricted Tournament and see the results of the skills they honed for six years.

Radia Schmitt, holding a training sword, continued to smile at Olivia.

However, Olivia felt suffocated, as if something was stuck in her throat.

"You know, Olivia?"

“…What?"

"Divine power. You must not use it."

“…Yeah, I know."

It would be nonsensical for someone who has declared giving up faith to use divine power, whether it is possible or not.

There are often people who use unauthorized divine power.

If things go well, they receive training at the temple and become official priests.

If they refuse, they are tried in a religious court.

So Olivia must not use divine power in public.

She must participate in the tournament with her divine power sealed. Upon hearing Olivia say she already knew this, Radia Schmitt tilted her head.

"Even without using divine power, you can easily beat someone like me?"

"Ah, no… That's not what I meant…”

Radia Schmitt's attitude was not one of mockery but of genuine curiosity. However, it was a difficult question for Olivia to answer. As Olivia struggled, Radia Schmitt lowered her head.

"Of course, being you, Olivia, you can undoubtedly do it."

Her tone was bright, without a hint of inferiority. However, the words that followed were enough to send chills down Olivia's spine.

"Olivia, don't deny the divinity within you."

"…”

"Return to the embrace of the divine. To where you belong."

Olivia couldn't look directly into Radia Schmitt's eyes.

Cold sweat formed in her hands, and goosebumps ran down her spine.

Olivia had been living with such an obsession as a part of her everyday life.

Members of the Club of Grace would also subtly inquire whether it wouldn't be better for her to restore her faith, dismissing her near-punishment as a mere aberration on the part of the Knight Commander of the Holy Order.

Radia Schmitt is not a member of the Club of Grace. She is an aspiring holy knight serving the god of war, Ares.

Although they serve different gods, she was a friend who always emphasized the need for harmony within the Five Great Theocracies.

Olivia was growing increasingly weary of such matters.

"I've told you, Radia. I've… given up on everything…"

"It's alright, Olivia. Your judgment might have been clouded for a moment. It's possible to lose your way and wander for a while."

Radia Schmitt's deep, abyss-like dark eyes stared at Olivia.

"So, I'll guide you to the right path."

"…"

"Because we're friends."

As Olivia saw Radia Schmitt's wide smile, her lips trembled.

What exactly is the right path she should follow, and how can she be guided?

Fear.

At some point, Olivia began to fear her friends who held faith.

And so, she found herself continually drawn to Reinhardt, unsure whether that was the reason.

Olivia thought as much.

Since Monday's exams were over, Reinhardt found himself being dragged into exam study sessions with Harriet and Ellen.

Honestly, he needed training for the tournament more than studying for exams, unless he was aiming for first place.

The last time he came in last place, it wasn't because he was dumb, but because he needed achievement points. He was confident he could beat Ludwig even without studying!

He could do it even if he solved only half the problems!

"This will be on the test. Memorize it."

"I already did."

"Memorize it more, then."

“…Fine."

But they had no way of knowing his situation, so they stuck with him, pointing out expected exam questions.

He felt good about it, but also as if his time was being taken away.

A peculiar situation.

He had already filled out and submitted the application form for the first-year tournament.

The preliminaries would take place this weekend, and if he advanced to the main round, the tournament would begin on the first day of the festival.

In the midst of studying, Harriet groaned and stretched.

She then stared intently at Reinhardt.

"Are you really going to vote for Miss Temple?"

“…Huh? All of a sudden?"

Harriet looked at him with a puffed-up expression.

"Why?"

"Just, are you going to vote or not? Just say that."

"Regardless of whether I vote or not, I have no intention of going to watch it."

"Oh… really? Ah, right."

Harriet looked oddly delighted.

From the beginning, Reinhardt was short on time, his throat parched for grape juice, and time was gold.

He had no time for leisurely watching such things, not knowing when the Black Order would approach, with the Vampire Council soon requiring action, and the Charlotte issue.

Did he have time to play?

Harriet laughed mysteriously and returned to her book.

"If you go to watch, you'll vote?"

But now Ellen asked that question, even though Harriet had been silent.

At those words, Harriet turned her gaze from the book back to him.

"So you're not going?"

"If I go, I'll vote, that's what I'm saying."

"Why are you saying that? I won't vote, even if I go!"

Why is she suddenly acting like this?

At his statement that he won't vote even if he goes, Ellen nodded, seemingly satisfied.

There's no way I would go to see the Miss Temple contest. Rather, if I needed achievement points urgently, I might have transformed myself into a girl and gone.

I have no interest in such things!

Besides, it's impossible for me to disguise myself as a Temple student other than myself, so I can't even disguise myself as a girl in the first place!

[Event Occurrence - Miss & Mister Temple Contest]

[Vote in the Miss & Mister Temple Contest. If all the candidates you voted for are elected, you will be rewarded.]

[Reward: One talent from each of the elected candidates]

…Here we go again.

A candy peddler who's dying to make my life difficult is trying to drag me into hell once more.

What should I do?

I already said I wouldn't go.

A powerful event that cannot be missed has occurred. If I go to the contest without telling anyone…

I won't be in a good situation.

And since Olivia Lanze is most likely to become Miss Temple, I would naturally vote for her. One of Olivia's talents? This event is practically a free gift.

It's strange not to participate.

Why not show it a little earlier? At least I wouldn't have said I wouldn't go!

Ah.

But come to think of it, it's a bit strange.

Although I can't participate in the Miss side, if I were to win the Mister Temple contest, what would be the reward?

I would be the winner and my talents are already mine.

[If you become Miss Temple, you will be granted a 'Talent Selection Right'.]

Ugh, seriously.

Even if I win Mister Temple, there's nothing for me.

If I become Miss Temple, I get a Talent Selection Right…

…No. I can't.

That's simply impossible from the start.

I can't possibly defeat Olivia Lanze, who already has a firm foothold.

It's no different from the nonsense of winning a cross-dressing contest and getting 4,000 points.

Since I can't disguise myself, I have to do such a thing to participate in Miss Temple.

"I'm participating in Miss Temple."

"Mister Temple?"

"Miss Temple."

“…But you're a man, aren't you?"

"Is there a rule that says a man can't participate in Miss Temple?"

"????"

Would I do such crazy nonsense!

Anyway.

I might not participate, but I have to go to the Miss Temple contest.

I can't miss such an event.

If I say I won't go and then sneak a peek, I'll eventually get caught. And in that case, what happens is entirely dependent on Ellen's mercy, right?

Even if I say I didn't vote for Olivia, why would she ask why I went if I wasn't going to vote for her?

"Well… I guess I could… go once."

Ellen and Harriet's eyes changed as I suddenly changed my mind.

"Ah, no! It's a festival, isn't it? And it's a part of the festival! We, we should enjoy the festival. Uh, um… Isn't that right?"

"…"

"…"

Even as I spoke, the atmosphere was so tense that my skin tingled.

I'm grateful for such an event… really, I am…

But why does it feel so bitter…?

To break the icy atmosphere, I couldn't resist making some absurd remark.

"Wait! It's not just the Miss Temple contest, there's the Mister Temple contest too!"

"As if you'd go to watch that, you fool!"

Smack!

Harriet smacked my head as if to say I shouldn't be spouting such nonsense.

"Ow, why did you hit me!"

In the first place, Miss Temple and Mister Temple are chosen together, so I'd end up seeing both contests anyway!

Enduring the cold gazes of the others, I became lost in thought.

Miss Temple and Mister Temple…

Ah.

So, do I get two free talents?

If I correctly choose both Miss Temple and Mister Temple, do I get two talents?

No, from the beginning.

This…

I think I need to choose both Miss Temple and Mister Temple correctly.

For Miss, it's Olivia Lanze.

Who is it for Mister?

In the original work, Olivia Lanze didn't appear. She wouldn't have been at the Temple at that time.

In the original, this year's Miss Temple was Scarlett, a class B student. The scene where Scarlett, once scorned for her red eyes and hair, became Miss Temple, was an important episode, as was Ludwig's tournament.

In the original, this festival's Mister Temple was Bertus.

He was a prince and handsome too. But will Bertus appear this time as well?

If Bertus appears and wins, I'll receive his swordsmanship talent, since I already have two of his other talents, Magic Body Strengthening and magic manipulation.

I can't predict which of Olivia Lanze's talents I might receive. It could be divine power, which wouldn't be bad either. She seems to be a monster as powerful as Ellen, so she's likely to give something amazing…

Good.

It's not just good, it's the best.

At the very least, if I receive Bertus's swordsmanship talent, I'll be able to wield a sword even better than I do now.

"I, just a moment."

As I stood up abruptly, Ellen and Harriet seemed even more irritated.

"No, I'm not going anywhere, I'm going to watch Bertus!"

"…"

"…"

However, their gazes held not an ounce of trust as they looked at me, who had quickly gone back on my word about not going.

Ah.

If only they'd given me the event a little earlier…

No, they probably gave it late on purpose. They were waiting for me to say I wouldn't go and then give it right away.

CHAPTER 278

It was not difficult to find Bertus, as he resided in the dormitory.

“…Mr. Temple?"

"Hm?"

"Why all of a sudden?"

"Well, I just thought you'd be a worthy candidate."

Bertus seemed taken aback by the suggestion.

"What, are you trying to say that you won't participate if I do?"

It seemed that this was the conclusion Bertus had arrived at.

In fact, he had told Ellen in the classroom today that he would participate in the tournament, so he had no choice but to do it.

"No, it's not that. I'm just curious."

Regardless of the possibilities, winning Mr. Temple would give me nothing, save for the challenge achievement points. It would be far more beneficial for me to support another strong contender.

"I'm not sure why you're curious about that, but I don't think I'll participate."

Although Bertus found it odd that I would ask such a thing, he provided an answer nonetheless.

I wondered why Bertus, who had participated in the original work, would not do so this time. If it was because his mind was preoccupied with Charlotte's issue, I could understand. From Bertus's perspective, Charlotte's resurrection would be his greatest concern.

Bertus would not participate.

Then, it was impossible to know who would become Mr. Temple.

To gain both abilities, I needed to correctly guess both winners, but this situation complicated matters.

However, I couldn't force Bertus to participate against his will.

If I were to become Mr. Temple, I would only receive one ability from the Miss Temple side…

To begin with, I wasn't even sure if I was worthy of becoming Mr. Temple.

As this event had brought me nothing but misery, I wanted to reap the maximum benefits possible.

It would be disappointing to only gain one ability when I could have had two…

Bertus's swordsmanship, one of Olivia's abilities.

I needed to maximize my gains in this situation, but the matter of Mr. Temple remained uncertain. Miss Temple was a sure thing, but if I couldn't guess Mr. Temple correctly, I would miss out on the opportunity.

What should I do…?

Becoming Mr. Temple myself was a last resort.

Well then!

If there wasn't one, I could create one!

I would make someone else, a more formidable contender, into Mr. Temple.

In doing so, that person's ability would come to me for free. After all, weren't there many here with rare and valuable talents that couldn't be bought with achievement points?

If I could find someone with a talent more overwhelming than Bertus's

swordsmanship and make them Mr. Temple, it would be possible.

I just needed someone to catch my attention.

If someone did, I would make them Mr. Temple.

If things were unclear, I could always use my veto!

With various candidates in mind, I headed toward the dormitory lobby.

Ludwig's stamina.

That, too, was a formidable ability. Should I consider making Ludwig Mr. Temple?

As I pondered these thoughts, I spotted the good-for-nothing trio huddled together in the dormitory lobby.

Not only were the good-for-nothing trio present, but also Heinrich von Schwarz.

That guy, always lurking around, had now joined the good-for-nothing trio.

To be honest, he wasn't exactly as worthless as them.

It appeared that they were studying together, gathered around and peering into a book.

"You lot."

I approached them.

"Ah, um… Reinhardt."

As I suddenly approached and plopped down onto an available chair near them, tension filled their expressions.

"Um… Do you have any business with us?"

Heinrich's hostility towards me had disappeared, but he still couldn't help but be cautious.

"Take a good look at me."

As if following my command, they tensed up and stared at me.

"Hmm…"

First, Heinrich von Schwartz.

His ability is pyrokinesis.

I have already confirmed that one can possess multiple Supernatural abilities, but due to my Fire of Hwayo, I don't really need pyrokinesis.

Even without the Fire of Hwayo, I suspect that as the level of my spirit mastery increases, spontaneous combustion might become possible.

He's out.

Next, Kono Lint.

His talent is telekinesis.

However, his flaws are severe. I feel sorry for giving him such an ability. His flaw disappears much too late for it to become insanely overpowered.

He's out too.

Erich de Lafaeri.

His talents are divine power, martial arts, and swordsmanship.

Although I don't have any of these three abilities, they aren't comprehensive talents, so they are somewhat disappointing.

Lastly.

Cayer Voiden.

He has only one talent: enormous magical power.

"…"

He's perfect.

Cayer Voiden's talent for enormous magical power is precisely that: possessing a vast amount of magical power.

Not only does he possess a tremendous amount of magical power, but his growth rate for magical power is also incredible. It's just that he's not apt in manipulating magical power, so he can't really use it.

His magical power rank is higher than even Ellen's. Ellen's current magical power rank is A+, while his is S rank, a step ahead of Ellen.

S rank magical power.

That's why, despite having the significant flaw of poor magical power manipulation, he can still be in the Royal class.

Moreover, I don't have the issue of magical power manipulation.

So, if I were to acquire the talent for enormous magical power, I would be able to use it to its fullest extent, and it would provide a significant boost to my Magic Body Strengthening.

Additionally, I know that when my magical power reaches the A rank, my magical power manipulation and magical power response will evolve into a new talent called magical power domination.

If I acquire enormous magical power, the comprehensive talent of magical power domination will follow.

He's perfect.

He is perfect, but…

"Ha…"

"Why, why are you like that…?"

Cayer Voiden seemed dispirited by my sudden sigh.

There's no point in making him Mr. Temple.

I stood up from my seat and patted Cayer's shoulder.

"Forget it. It's not your fault."

Even if he were to come back from the dead, he could never become Mr. Temple.

It's not exactly physiognomy, but…

Well…

If it doesn't work, it doesn't work.

Not even with a rewrite… It just won't work.

I had no choice but to give up gracefully in the face of reality.

I wouldn't know if it were about guessing the last place.

But predicting the first place doesn't work.

The most desirable talent was unattainable as a candidate for Mr. Temple due to realistic issues.

There was an option of managing and somehow working around it.

However…

There were cases where it just wouldn't work, and unfortunately, Cayer was one of them.

Who should I make Mister Temple, then? Should I create a proper protagonist this time, considering that the previous ones have been too insignificant?

Upon returning to the study room, Ellen and Harriet were staring at me with puzzled expressions.

"I told you, I went to see Bertus."

"Who said what?"

"…"

It seemed like they were both quite angry, thinking I was going to participate in the contest.

Well, I did cross the line a bit with that banter, but…

Of course, we weren't the only ones in the study room.

In a quiet corner, there was a guy diligently studying by himself.

So inconspicuous that we hardly noticed him last time, Harriet apologized for making noise, and he reassured her while breaking out in a cold sweat.

A guy suffering from severe anthropophobia.

My swordsmanship friend.

Cliffman.

His talent was solely in 'Combat.'

A comprehensive cheat-level talent that instinctively finds the best way to achieve victory in all types of fights.

While 'Gigantic Mana' is currently the most necessary talent for me, this guy's talent is unrivaled in terms of versatility.

In fact, considering the future, the combat talent might be more useful for me. I will eventually obtain 'Mana Control' anyway.

"…"

As if sensing my gaze, Cliffman, who had been burying his head in his studies, looked at me with a start.

"Do you have something to say…?"

I strode over to Cliffman and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Cliffman."

"Uh, uh? Why?"

"Let's participate in Mister Temple."

He has potential.

He has more than enough potential!

"Uh, uh, uh, uh?"

"???"

"…?"

My sudden remark left not only Cliffman but also Harriet and Ellen utterly perplexed.

"Your anthropophobia needs to be cured by now! What was it? Sh-shock therapy! Aim for Mister Temple! Fix it all at once! Am I right? Huh, right?"

"Wh-what are you even talking about?"

Cliffman couldn't even comprehend what he was hearing.

"Just do it! You're the kind of guy who can, right?"

"Th-that's too sudden, I don't understand what you're saying…"

"Why don't you give it a try?"

"Why are you suddenly harassing a peaceful kid, you lunatic?!"

-Whack!

"Ouch!"

In the end, I was smacked on the back of the head by Harriet.

Telling a kid who was quietly studying to participate in Mister Temple out of nowhere.

Even I thought it was too abrupt. Naturally, Cliffman was bewildered, and Harriet and Ellen couldn't understand why I was suddenly acting like this.

No.

If you knew my situation now, you'd think it's possible, right? The problem is that it's difficult to explain.

Cliffman's talent in combat is a top-tier ability that rivals Ellen's mastery of magic and Harriet's spellcasting. It would cost 50,000 achievement points to acquire.

Considering that the first-year tournament offers a staggering reward of 10,000 achievement points for the winner, his ability is worth five times that amount.

It would be better to go all-in on making him Mister Temple if there was a way to do so without participating in the tournament.

Harriet cocks her head.

"What's your sudden reason for wanting him to become Mister Temple?"

"Isn't it obvious? The festival is just around the corner. I'm trying to help him overcome his chronic human seasickness."

At my words, Ellen now cocks her head.

"Will that cure him?"

"He'll gain confidence, at least. No matter what happens."

"Hmmm…"

Sandwiched between us, Cliffman stood rigid as if being lynched, beads of cold sweat

dripping down his face. Harriet clicked her tongue as she watched him wither under our gaze.

"He's going to have a heart attack if he becomes Mister Temple, just from us looking at him. Do you really think he can handle that?"

"…"

Although I don't know about Mister Temple, it seems like you just dealt the final blow?

Harriet occasionally strikes children down with words without even realizing it, and this was one of those times.

"Anyway… How could I… participate in Mister Temple… There must be many more amazing people than me…"

That was the best defense Cliffman could muster.

"No, you're underestimating yourself too much."

You have potential, unlike Cayer. I'm not just saying this for no reason. Though the excuse about possibly curing his human seasickness might be far-fetched, there was a frustrating aspect to watching Cliffman.

And I can make something borderline happen if it can't happen outright!

I just need to use Rewrite!

It's a given that he stutters in front of everyone, but he's at a level where he's mentally exhausted just from conversation.

In fact, during practice matches, he can't fully demonstrate most of his abilities. Of course, even in that state, he still overwhelmingly defeats me, but the same goes for when he practices against Ellen.

At first, he was so flustered that he couldn't do anything until he got hit and passed out. And nothing changed afterward.

"Think of it as part of your skill improvement. You tend to get too tense. That can

make things that should be possible, impossible. Look at me, I've managed to increase my magic power by recklessly pushing myself with overflowing confidence in spite of having nothing to boast about."

"It's quite something that you can say that so candidly… really."

"…I don't think it's something to be proud of."

Although I said this for Cliffman's sake, Harriet and Ellen frowned.

You two, go away! We don't need you! Can't you see he's getting more nervous because of you? He looks like he's going to cry and throw up!

…But isn't this, in the end, tormenting him?

Should I stop?

But still…

This is indeed an opportunity not to be missed.

I gaze at the frozen Cliffman.

He is the tallest among the first-year students, and strictly speaking, he has a somewhat cold yet handsome appearance. From a distance, he exudes an aura that makes it difficult to approach him, but in reality, when one gets this close, he turns out to be quite a flustered fellow.

To be honest, this should be enough.

"What do you two think?"

In the end, my opinion has its limits, so I ask Ellen and Harriet, looking at them.

The possibility of Cliffman becoming Mr. Temple.

"Uh, well…"

As the two of them stare intently at Cliffman, his expression becomes more and more pained.

“…I don't think he'll be eliminated in the preliminaries?"

Harriet's honest answer.

"I think so too."

Ellen's agreement.

Unexpectedly, Cliffman's face turns even redder at their praise. I confidently place my hand on Cliffman's shoulder.

"See? Everyone thinks you can do it, so give it a try. Do you think I'd say this just to see you humiliated?"

"But still…”

Is this really not right?

In this state, it would be a blessing if he doesn't cry when forced onto the stage. What if he does cry and becomes the laughingstock of others? This might leave a permanent scar on his psyche, causing him to drop out of the Temple.

I might completely ruin a kid for nothing.

It's a pity, but it seems like a better choice to put someone like Ludwig, who would go along if pushed, on stage.

"If it's too much, there's no need to force it. I'm sorry for my thoughtless words…”

In the end, when I'm about to apologize and give up because further insistence would only torment him,

"I don't know why Reinhardt is suddenly acting like this… Are you really okay with this?"

"…”

Ellen suddenly interjects.

This can't go on.

That doesn't just mean the relationship between people. Even when facing anyone, Cliffman can't fully display his abilities. Yet, despite not being able to show his true skills, his overwhelming talent compensates for it.

He practices with Ellen and undergoes Magic Body Strengthening exercises, but due to his nervousness, he never makes progress.

It's all because of his lack of confidence and motion sickness.

"You know it too, right?"

“…Yes."

Cliffman nods slightly with his head bowed, seemingly aware of his own shortcomings and that he needs to overcome them.

"I don't know why you have to participate in Mr. Temple, but if it can improve that aspect of you, I don't think it's a bad idea."

"Is… Is that so…?"

"Yes."

Ellen continues to look at Cliffman with her usual emotionless expression.

Wow…

Ellen is better than me…

"If you don't want to fix it, I understand, but if you do, you have to try something, right?"

"…”

My reason for wanting to send Cliffman to Mr. Temple is entirely different, but suddenly, Ellen supports the idea.

“……I'll think about it."

And so, it seemed that Cliffman was truly eager to overcome his shortcomings.

-Swish!

Having given his answer, Cliffman abruptly stood up from his seat. Ellen, Harriet, and I stared blankly at him, surprised by his sudden movement.

"Where are you going all of a sudden?"

In response to Harriet's question, Cliffman covered his mouth and began to sway unsteadily.

"My stomach feels a bit off…”

"Ah."

"…”

This guy.

Is he really alright?

Am I causing unnecessary trouble?

Cliffman staggered away from his seat.

CHAPTER 279

Cliffman seemed to have exhausted his social energy and mental strength for the day, for he did not return.

No, it would be more accurate to say that he could not return. Harriet was glaring at me.

"What on earth are you up to?"

"I mean exactly what I said."

"Now you're even causing trouble for others?"

"Why is it trouble for him to be Mr. Temple?"

"If you force someone to do something they would never do on their own, isn't that causing trouble?"

"I did it with purely good intentions."

In truth, my intentions were far from good…

Perhaps I should have tried to dissuade Cliffman instead. While his talent for combat was impressive, if things went wrong, he could miss out on honing his skills and be left with permanent scars.

He was a good kid, even with his bouts of queasiness. I didn't want to abandon him.

While I didn't agree with Harriet's words, I had to wonder if suggesting Cliffman participate in the Mr. Temple contest was a disaster in and of itself.

"Really, he does such random things and catches us off guard, doesn't he, Ellen?"

-Nod

I had to admit that my sudden proposal to Cliffman was extremely out of the blue.

No, it was something I would never have done under normal circumstances. The real problem was the trickster who created unexpected events at unexpected times, leaving us no choice but to act.

“…I think I know why you did it."

Ellen looked at me and casually spat the words out.

How could you possibly know why I did this?

"You're just trying to see that senior, aren't you? The one you're supposed to visit as a friend."

What? This was a ridiculous misunderstanding!

"No, what kind of absurd nonsense is that?"

"You're using that as an excuse to go see the Miss Temple contest. It doesn't have to be that particular senior."

“…Wow."

At Ellen's words, Harriet's eyes widened as if she hadn't considered that possibility.

If anyone could convey "you're trash" just through their gaze, it would be Harriet.

No, guys… You're not entirely wrong, but that's not the whole story.

There's a reason… There really is…

"No, damn it! That's not the reason, but why shouldn't I go? What could possibly go wrong if I'm there?"

"There's no reason you shouldn't."

“…Exactly."

Why, then, was she glaring at me as if she wanted to devour me?!

In the end, I became the strange guy who sent his friend to the Mr. Temple contest

and used that as an excuse to watch the Miss Temple contest – an utterly preposterous act.

I could have just gone to watch it without any bizarre excuses!

One way or another, my studies had taken a back seat.

Harriet seemed deep in thought before she looked at me and asked, "By the way, is that senior also participating in the tournament?"

"How should I know?"

"You usually tell me everything, even the things you don't need to."

True enough. But I didn't know if she was participating in the tournament or not.

Come to think of it, she had provoked Ellen by claiming she could beat everyone. Perhaps she intended to join the tournament.

"…"

Ellen remained silent, offering no additional information.

"Could it be that you're planning to participate?"

"Why?"

Upon hearing my question, Ellen gazed at me quietly.

"Do you think I would lose?"

"No, I didn't say anything."

All I asked was if she was going to participate, and she responded with such a statement. What's up with that?

But then again, based on what I saw in the classroom today, what I heard, and the fact that Olivia was a fifth-year student…

It might be a bit challenging for Ellen at the moment…

Repeatedly, children would notice that I'm not very good at managing my facial expressions.

It seemed Ellen had read something from my expression.

"Forget it. I'm not particularly interested in the tournament anyway."

That's what Ellen said. However, her mood didn't seem to improve.

“…Let's call it a day."

Perhaps feeling upset, Ellen sat down for a moment and then decided to leave, saying she was tired. I absentmindedly stared at the door of the study room that Ellen closed quietly behind her.

"You upset her with your weird remarks!"

"Why are you blaming me?!"

Suddenly, Harriet brought up the tournament and made the situation awkward. Of course, it wasn't entirely Harriet's fault.

"Really… do you think Ellen would lose?"

"I don't know."

“…I can't imagine it."

Harriet seemed unable to envision Ellen losing.

Anyway, Ellen claimed she had no interest in the tournament, and it seemed true.

It was strange.

Considering Ellen's pride, one would expect her to want to face Olivia Lanze in the tournament.

I never thought she would be disinterested, regardless of winning or losing.

And then…

"You know."

"What?"

"What about me?"

Harriet suddenly said something unexpected.

"What are you talking about?"

"Would I lose to that senior as well?"

I was taken aback by the unforeseen question.

"You? What are you even saying?"

“…Why, can't I participate in the tournament?"

"The tournament is mainly for close combat majors, right? You're a magic major."

"There's no rule that says I can't participate. I know that too."

That's true, undoubtedly.

But the reason why magic majors don't typically participate in the tournament is that it's nearly impossible for them to defeat close combat specialists.

How would you deal with a close combat major who jumps right in front of you while you're casting an offensive spell?

It's not an ambush, but a face-to-face fight in a limited battlefield.

It's more than just a disadvantage.

I would have thought Ellen would be the one to participate if someone were to.

"You never know until you try."

I didn't understand why Harriet was behaving like this.

However, after the incident at Aaron Mede's mansion, it seemed that Harriet had changed somehow as well.

Ellen was willing to face an opponent for whom the outcome was hard to predict.

“…Just don't push yourself too hard."

"Okay."

Harriet looked at me and smiled.

"You'll cheer for me, right?"

“…People are naturally inclined to root for the underdog."

"So what?"

I sighed as I watched Harriet cock her head.

"Of course, I'll cheer for you."

I'll support you, even though it's obvious you'll lose.

"Ugh, seriously annoying!"

Harriet pouted in response to my words.

Anyway.

Harriet had decided to participate in the Unrestricted Class Tournament, even though she was not a first-year student.

In truth, I planned to support Harriet.

At the very least, simply advancing without encountering Olivia Lanze would be a tremendous achievement.

Harriet went somewhere, claiming to submit her application for the Unrestricted Class Tournament. No matter how much of a genius she is, I can't understand how she plans to break through and rise against numerous close combat majors, even

seniors, in the unfavorable circumstances of a tournament.

She must have her own thoughts about it.

I didn't have much enthusiasm for studying for exams as I had to study reluctantly due to other students.

I left the study room and practiced my sword alone in the training ground.

Magic Body Strengthening.

"Hmm…"

Although it wasn't like a real battle situation, I got the hang of it to some extent.

I managed to move something that couldn't move, awakening a completely new sensation.

With the results of the lessons I had unknowingly received and my self-suggestion rank increased to A, I became stronger.

It wouldn't work for the Unrestricted Class, but winning the first-year championship should be possible.

Especially since Ellen, the most powerful championship candidate, wouldn't participate.

"Shatter."

Another power, the incantation.

I murmured quietly towards the scarecrow, but nothing happened.

"…"

…Irritating.

Self-suggestion was mostly done through thoughts.

But incantations had to be spoken out loud.

So, I had to shout out what I wanted with intention.

Actually, standing in front of the scarecrow, shouting to shatter, and nothing happening.

It's hundreds of times more embarrassing than self-suggestion.

This is a humiliation play!

I became the person with the most powerful supernatural ability in the world, but why does performance and embarrassment go hand in hand?

In a real battle situation, if I try to use an incantation, I have to shout something, and if nothing happens, it would be incredibly embarrassing!

Why do all my abilities feel like this…

Moreover, the F-rank incantation seemed to have even less effect than the F-rank self-suggestion.

In the end.

It seems that I'm still a typical protagonist in a comic with supernatural abilities… The kind that only works when it's sincere… That sort of thing.

Of course, a supernatural ability that responds well during training but doesn't work in real situations would be even more useless.

I know this side is much better.

It's hard…

"Uh, sh-shatter… please?"

Somehow, as my spirit faltered, my voice grew quieter.

But practicing incantations loudly and confidently in the training ground, and if someone came in, I'd want to strangle myself.

For several hours alone, I practiced Magic Body Strengthening, incantations, self-

suggestion, and swordsmanship until the sun set.

-Thump

How much time had passed?

"…"

"Uh… Are you here?"

Ellen appeared in the training ground, wearing casual clothes. Was she still angry because of my subtle reaction earlier? Ellen took a practice sword from the rack and approached me.

"Let's do it."

"Uh, yes. Alright."

As if nothing had happened, Ellen pointed her sword at me.

I hadn't said anything, and we hadn't fought.

Like any other day, Ellen and I practiced our swordsmanship.

-Clang!

-Clang!

-Clank!

"Ugh!"

"Read the trajectory better."

"I'm trying…!"

"You're not doing it at all."

-Clatter!

Though my skills had improved significantly, I was still no match for Ellen.

In the end, this was more important to me than anything else.

Cliffman still seemed to be deliberating and wasn't at the training hall today.

-Smack!

As soon as Ellen deflected my sword, she swiftly brought her elbow toward my chin.

Had she struck me properly, it might have broken my neck, but she stopped just in time.

As always, it was my defeat.

A defeat I had grown accustomed to experiencing.

"…"

"…"

Our eyes met for a moment. Sweat had trickled down Ellen's face, causing her hair to stick to her forehead.

I had always lost to her, and that had become my daily life.

But now, even after hours of sparring, Ellen was sweating.

I couldn't remember when it started, but at some point, I realized:

I had become much stronger. While I couldn't tire Ellen out, I was no longer an opponent she could easily dominate as before.

Ellen remained still in her stance, looking at me.

Ellen was shorter than me, so naturally, she looked up at me slightly.

"Do you think… I'll lose?"

Ellen asked without a subject.

Had she been thinking about that all along?

"How would I know?"

"You're lying."

Ellen looked at me.

"You think I'll lose."

"…"

I had subconsciously thought that Olivia would be stronger than Ellen.

"I know it too. I'll lose. I just… I had a feeling. It's not a big deal. I know."

Neither of us had shown our true skills to each other. But it seemed that from the moment Olivia Lanze had grabbed her wrist, Ellen had already realized everything.

Was it the feeling that she couldn't compete with this person?

"I'm… sorry."

"…"

Ellen looked at me quietly. She hung her practice sword on the rack and dusted off her hands.

"Don't apologize."

"…"

"It makes me feel worse."

Ellen sat on the windowsill of the training hall, gazing absentmindedly outside.

Now, it was winter.

Ellen took off her casual training suit jacket.

Her black short-sleeved shirt was quite damp with sweat. Ellen draped the jacket over her shoulders and looked at me.

"I don't really want to fight her and win."

"Is that so?"

Ellen looked out at the temple, where winter was approaching.

Sitting on the windowsill, she swung her feet and looked at me.

"I'm going to enter Miss Temple."

"Uh?"

"I want to defeat her there."

Ellen had chosen a completely different battlefield.

"I don't want to become Miss Temple. I might lose that too. She's famous and… pretty. But that's okay."

"…"

"I just need one vote."

Ellen said that, looking at me.

Just one vote was needed.

Ellen didn't explicitly say whose vote she needed.

She was just looking at me.

I couldn't bring myself to look Ellen in the eye.

Ellen spoke those words, stepped down from the windowsill, and walked toward me.

She gently touched the tips of my fingers, then let go.

Her expression seemed calm, but I could clearly feel her hand trembling slightly as it touched mine.

She couldn't look me in the eye either.

"I'll be going."

Harriet participated in the Unrestricted Class Tournament, and Ellen entered Miss Temple. Both were completely unexpected.

CHAPTER 280

The following day.

"I shall give it a try."

Cliffman spoke with a tone of resolution.

Of course, after saying that, he spent quite some time agonizing over the Mister Temple application form.

It seemed that Ellen and Harriet had already submitted their applications. Both of them seemed to know that the other had decided to participate in the tournament and Miss Temple.

"Why not just close your eyes and write?"

"Well, when I actually try to write, I feel queasy…"

Cliffman became utterly disheartened in the dormitory lobby while holding a piece of paper, and I was urging him to just write if he had made up his mind.

As we were doing this for a while, Liana de Grantz happened to pass by and approached us.

"What are you two doing?"

"Uh, well… that… um…"

When Liana suddenly spoke to him, Cliffman stuttered as expected. He was especially weak against those who came on strong. Ellen was one of them, and though their methods differed, Liana also had a straightforward approach.

In reality, Liana didn't have much of a boundary between friends and non-friends. She would speak to anyone and interact without hesitation.

As Cliffman couldn't respond and faltered, I eventually opened my mouth.

"He's considering participating in Mister Temple."

“…You?"

At that, Liana frowned deeply, as if she had misheard something.

No, it's not me, okay? And what does it matter?

"It's not me, Cliffman wants to participate."

“…Him?"

"…”

The reaction was the same.

Seriously.

You?

Him?

With a single word, she had a knack for teasing people.

Cliffman's expression was that of someone caught dreaming beyond their means. Liana sat across from him and stared intently at his face.

"Hmm."

A cryptic hum.

Liana didn't say anything about whether it was possible or not for him to participate or why he should join such a thing.

She just looked at him intently, seemingly deep in thought.

"Um, so… maybe it's a bit too much… ah, haha. Hahaha…”

Scratching his head, Cliffman was about to give up on the idea and reached for the application form.

Is this not meant to be?

Thwack!

"Ouch!"

But as Cliffman tried to grab the application, Liana slapped his hand with a thwack.

"Give it to me."

"Uh, what?"

"What's so difficult about writing this that you're agonizing and sulking?"

Liana's demeanor exuded amusement.

Come to think of it, if we were to be strict, she was the true delinquent of Class A.

She relied solely on her talent and showed no interest in studying, and having been born into a wealthy family, she used money like water. Because of Ellen, Adelia, and Harriet, she was forced to study during the exam period and was quite annoyed.

With such an interesting opportunity, she couldn't miss out on the fun.

Liana began to fill out Cliffman's application form for him, including his name and affiliation.

"When's your birthday?"

"Uh, well… that is…"

"Quickly."

"June 18th…"

"Height and weight."

She filled out the application form on behalf of Cliffman, leaving only the signature blank, and handed it to him.

"Sign here."

"What?"

"Sign it, will you? It's your duty."

"Well, I… I'm not quite ready for that yet…"

Liana's eyebrows furrowed.

"Just do it. Do you want to get shocked? Fancy turning crisp?"

-Zap! Sizzle!

Witnessing the blue spark from Liana's fingertip, Cliff hurriedly scribbled his signature.

That Liana.

She knew precisely how to handle Cliff.

Did she know that the indecisive and squeamish ones needed to be led by the scruff of their necks?

No, that's just her nature. Taking the signed application, Liana tilted her head.

"Should I submit this myself?"

"Well, I… I'm not quite sure…"

"Perhaps you should go?"

At my words, Liana nodded.

"Nothing wrong with someone coming along, right?"

"I guess so?"

-Thump

Liana promptly stood up, patting the shivering Cliffman on the shoulder.

"Hey, follow me."

"Uh, uhm?"

"Can't understand a word, can you? Do you really want to get shocked?"

"Uh, uhm, okay, okay!"

As Cliffman sprang up from his seat, Liana led the way with the application in hand.

"Can't even do a simple thing like this. How troublesome."

Liana strode ahead, and Cliffman stared at me.

Help me out here!

His expression seemed to plead.

No way…

I can't help him either… There's nothing I can do.

Reluctantly, like a cow being led to slaughter, Cliff followed Liana with a wobbly gait.

When they returned after some time, Liana brought Cliffman back with a satisfied expression.

It seemed they had submitted the application.

"Hmm…"

"Now what?"

"First of all, you look too pathetic. Your hair, your expression, your posture, everything."

At the blunt criticism, Cliff's face briefly turned ashen.

Liana sat Cliff down, experimenting with different looks by combing his hair back, tousling it, and so on.

That's right… she…

She enjoyed dressing people up.

It seemed she intended to do the same with Cliff, as she had with Ellen. Did it not matter if it was a man or woman, as long as the mannequin was acceptable?

Of course, every time Liana touched him, Cliff flinched, his heart racing in real time.

"Hmm… something's missing…"

How did this turn into Operation Makeover for Cliff?

"Anyway, trust me, little brother."

"Huh? Uh, um… yeah… but why are you calling me your little brother?"

"Never mind that. Just get it over with."

"Uh, okay, okay!"

Is this how it's supposed to be? Is this right?

Did I just hand over a male Reinhardt to a female Reinhardt?

I didn't need to persuade or do anything, as Liana suddenly began fussing over Cliff.

Every time I tried to add something, Liana snatched control away, saying, "What do you know about this?"

As Clifman cast a resentful glance, a pang of guilt stirred within me. However, after careful consideration, it seemed more likely that the wickedness named Reinhardt and the wickedness named Liana de Grantz would make Clifman a better candidate for Mister Temple.

In fact, she pays more attention to her attire, and her grooming skills are better than mine.

So, in the end, I had no say in the matter, and it seemed that I didn't have to worry about it, as a more capable person took over.

But that wasn't the end. While Clifman and Liana were busy discussing, Ellen hurriedly approached Liana from a distance.

It's been a while since I've seen her move with such haste.

"Liana."

"Ah, Ellen. What's up?"

"I want to buy a dress. Can you help me choose one?"

"A dress? Suddenly?"

"Yes."

Ellen nodded.

"I'm going to participate in Miss Temple."

“…Huh?"

Liana was momentarily astonished.

Why would she do that?

Astonishment, confusion.

"Oh. Oh, wow!"

And then excitement.

The opportunity to dress up her two favorite subjects had arisen.

"Great! Both of you, follow me to my room! No! Come to our mansion on the weekend! I'll have the entire boutique from Huangdao brought over!"

With Clifman in her left hand and Ellen in her right, Liana de Grantz was on the verge

of pure bliss.

—---

Liana did not question Clifman and Ellen's unexpected decision to participate.

She seemed thrilled at the thought of trying on various outfits, as if it were a good thing.

I let them handle that side of things. As for me, I don't know much about fashion, and my task is to confirm the winner for the elimination round. If Liana does a good job dressing them up, the points needed for elimination would decrease.

However, Ellen's involvement introduced a new variable.

Having Ellen as Miss Temple wouldn't be a bad idea. Both Olivia and Ellen are very talented.

To be honest, I would be happy to randomly obtain the talent of either one, and the most important thing is to gain Clifman's battle talent.

But still, I can't help but wonder…

Between Ellen and Olivia…

If I were to vote for one of them, the one I choose must win.

If I vote for Ellen and Olivia ends up winning, I'll ultimately gain nothing.

And…

Frankly, it's evident that Olivia has a higher chance of winning. Leaving aside various considerations, her popularity is on a different level.

However, Ellen claimed she needed just one vote.

So Ellen intends to participate in Miss Temple despite knowing her chances of winning are slim.

"…”

Damn it.

Complications never seem to disappear, only multiplying, ranging from large-scale issues to personal relationships.

Problems will continue to grow and grow.

—---

Although it's exam time, the atmosphere in the Royal Class of first-year students has changed significantly. It's not just because of the exams.

It was due to the newly arrived dormitory teacher, Saviolin Turner.

"Reinhardt! Teacher Turner has called for students who want to take swordsmanship lessons!"

Excited, Ludwig had come all the way to Class A dormitory. Although it was the exam period, it seemed he was eager to receive some special instruction.

"Of course we're going, right?"

"Do you not have any concerns about this being the exam period?"

You should be studying, you knucklehead! Even though it wasn't my place to say, I had a lot on my mind while he seemed unbothered.

At my words, Ludwig scratched his head, laughing heartily.

"Ah, come on, when will we get such an opportunity again? We don't even know when she'll quit teaching."

He had a point. Ludwig was interested in improving his skills but had neither the talent nor the interest in studying.

"Anyway, please pass on the message to Class A! We'll be having the lesson at the Class B dormitory's training hall!"

Leaving me with the responsibility of spreading the news, Ludwig dashed back to the Class B dormitory.

…Why do I always find him so irritating?

I ought to just drop dead, considering he's the protagonist I created. Sighing, I went from room to room in Class A dormitory, delivering the message about Saviolin Turner.

I was no different from Ludwig. I too thought it would be better to attend Saviolin Turner's swordsmanship lesson rather than regular classes.

—---

Despite it being the exam period, people gathered in the training hall of the Class B dormitory.

From Class A, only Erich and I were present.

Lately, Erich seemed to be putting in a lot of effort, but it was hard to say how much progress he had made.

Cliffman really wanted to come, but he was dragged away by Liana.

Ellen seemed eager to come, but she couldn't make it because she had something to discuss with Liana regarding the Miss Temple contest.

From Class B, Scarlett, Ludwig, and Delfin Izzard were present.

Delfin's main focus wasn't swordsmanship, but he was learning it, and he seemed curious about what the famous Saviolin Turner, leader of the Shanafel, would teach.

Saviolin Turner didn't acknowledge me since she entered the dormitory. She was here to protect Charlotte. And I needed to stay hidden so I could take action if necessary.

If something happened, she would look for me, but for now, she would merely nod at my greeting and pass by without a word.

It was meant to protect me, but it still felt somewhat bitter.

'Sorry for ignoring you.'

'What to do?'

'It would be troublesome if I openly acknowledge you.'

'Sorry… '

Of course, his thoughts were clearly visible on his stern face.

"Thank you for gathering during this busy time."

With that brief courtesy, she took a practice sword from the rack.

It was a shame that the real ace, Ellen, wasn't present.

I was curious how Saviolin Turner would evaluate Ellen's skills. However, today wasn't the only opportunity.

In fact, Saviolin Turner seemed slightly puzzled by Ellen's absence. She just didn't show it.

"I am not eloquent, nor am I accustomed to teaching. So, if you want to learn something from me, you'll have to learn with your body. Students who realize a lot will learn a lot, while those who don't know what they're doing wrong will learn little."

Saviolin Turner surveyed the five gathered individuals.

"Those who wish to participate, come forward one by one."

"I'll give it a try!"

Ludwig boldly stepped forward.

"What is your name?"

"I am Ludwig, B-11!"

Saviolin Turner and Ludwig were supposed to become master and pupil after the Gate incident.

Saviolin Turner was a harsh and cruel teacher, while Ludwig had to become accustomed to her demanding and rough teaching methods, despite finding them terrible.

She had also taught Ellen, but she had to invest more effort in Ludwig than Ellen. Of course, that didn't mean she didn't teach Ellen anything.

Ludwig and Saviolin Turner – unintentionally, my actions had succeeded in bringing them together more than a year earlier than they were supposed to meet.

After the Gate, Saviolin Turner had been harsh to Ludwig due to the unavoidable circumstances, but now, there were no such issues.

Could these two build a more gentle and moderate master-pupil relationship?

"Here I come!"

"You don't need to shout."

"Yes, understood!"

"I said you don't need to shout."

"Yes!"

“…Fine. Give it a try."

-Clang!

Saviolin Turner managed to deflect Ludwig's powerful sword thrust with just her right hand and, within a single move, pointed the tip of her sword at his throat.

"Ah."

"Hmm…”

Saviolin Turner frowned as she looked at Ludwig.

"Pitiful."

"I'm sorry!"

"No need to apologize. It's just the truth."

"I'll work hard!"

"…"

Saviolin Turner stared intently at the spirited Ludwig.

'Hmm… '

'Uh-huh… '

'Why… '

'I don't like this kid.'

As expected, Saviolin Turner's inner thoughts were clearly readable.

CHAPTER 281

Ludwig was no slouch in terms of skill, and compared to the first semester, he had grown significantly, even when compared to the original work.

Saviolin Turner crossed swords with Ludwig five times in a row. As expected, she subdued him in a single bout.

Being the expert she was, she did not use any Magic Body Strengthening but relied solely on her technique to overpower him.

Indeed, she was different from Ellen.

With the bare minimum of movement necessary, she did not allow Ludwig even an inch of approach by merely pointing her sword at him.

It did not seem like she was using much strength either. She held the practice sword in her right hand and slightly tapped it, causing his sword to be pushed back and its trajectory disrupted.

At present, there was no one who could rival Saviolin Turner in close combat. It was only natural that there would be a significant difference in skill between her and Ellen, and even Olivia Lanze.

There was a saying about sky above sky.

If Ludwig and I were scraping by on the ground, then Ellen would be in the stratosphere, and perhaps Saviolin Turner was on the moon.

No, maybe she was from an entirely different star system. After all, she was able to summon an Aura Sword without a sword in hand.

An overwhelming wall.

Ludwig showed no signs of self-loathing or emptiness after being defeated so easily, scratching his head.

"I practiced a lot, but I'm still lacking, Turner."

"Call me 'teacher.' I am not here in my capacity as a knight."

"Yes, teacher!"

"…"

Saviolin Turner asked Ludwig to pick up his sword and assume a stance.

"Ludwig, your understanding of the sword is shallow. You've learned mechanically. You know the forms, but you don't understand why they are necessary. Without understanding, you put too much force into your movements. Swordsmanship does not require excessive force. The fundamental theories of swordsmanship assume that no Magic Body Strengthening is used. You need a deeper understanding of the techniques."

"Yes, teacher!"

"If you're curious about the details, come and ask me separately. That's enough. Next."

Ludwig, who had been unusually bright, stepped back, and Delfin stepped forward.

"Your name?"

"Delfin Izzard… Um, pleased to meet you."

Although Delfin Izzard was not as bright as Ludwig, he was still quite nervous. It was only proper to be so in front of someone of her caliber.

It was like having Einstein visit their class for gifted students in science. She was here to personally observe their study methods and provide advice.

The one who was not nervous, Ludwig, was the odd one.

Delfin lunged at Turner with his practice sword. Turner, as before, twisted Delfin's incoming blade with her own, pushing it away at an angle.

"Ah!"

Delfin lost control of his sword, his wrist twisted, and eventually dropped his weapon.

"Hmm."

Turner tilted her head as she watched Delfin, his face red, quickly pick up his practice sword.

"You're not a swordsmanship major."

"Ah, no…"

"Archery, then?"

"Yes? Oh… how did you…?"

"If there's such a callus between the thumb and index finger, that must be it."

At Turner's words, Delfin's face went pale as he stared at her in a daze. The natural callus formed from relentlessly handling the bowstring, it seemed Turner had noticed it.

"I have nothing to teach you. Next."

Turner dismissed Delfin without offering any advice on archery. Flustered and blushing, Delfin retreated as if fleeing the scene.

Come on, couldn't she have offered some advice? How merciless.

Next up was Scarlett.

Scarlett, too, was tense as she nervously licked her lips.

"I'm Scarlett… Please take care of me."

"Come forth."

"Yes."

Scarlett seemed to be cautiously probing Turner rather than thrusting her training

sword.

She was looking for an opening to exploit.

In terms of pure skill, Scarlett was the best among us gathered here. My swordsmanship is exceptional due to various factors rather than just skill.

"If you're not coming, I'll come to you."

As Turner took a step forward, Scarlett retreated a step back with her sword aimed at her opponent. Did she think that the moment the sword touched her, she'd be completely suppressed?

Turner's steps were not hasty. For each step she took forward, Scarlett retreated one step.

But one couldn't keep retreating forever.

Turner's sword was not particularly fast. Rather, it seemed as if she was deliberately moving slowly.

Of course, she wouldn't do this in a real fight.

It was like posing a question.

How would you handle this sword stroke? With that feeling, she honestly swung her sword from above toward Scarlett.

Scarlett had seen that the moment the sword touched, it would wrap around and either deflect or be repelled.

Scarlett's choice was to evade.

In the moment she attempted to dodge, stepping to the side of the sword's path.

"!"

Turner pulled her descending sword toward her body and instantly changed it into a thrust.

The two actions were nearly simultaneous.

As if she knew beforehand that Scarlett would try to dodge, the moment Scarlett's body moved, Turner's sword had already transformed into a thrust.

However, it was not impossible to counter.

Scarlett pushed her own training sword toward Turner's transformed thrust.

Her sword was directed further inward.

If she pushed like this, Turner's sword would be forced away from Scarlett's body and onto an outer trajectory.

In this manner, Scarlett could stab Turner while Turner's sword would miss.

But as Scarlett's thrust and push simultaneously met Turner's sword—

-Whoosh!

Turner twisted her wrist, reversing the sword's direction.

She swiftly took control of the inside, effortlessly brushing aside Scarlett's training sword and aimed the blade at her throat.

If one were to judge by the face value, it was a single exchange.

Considering the previous actions, it ended in two exchanges.

"Hmm. Not bad."

Saviolin Turner seemed to nod in approval, more concerned with Scarlett's judgment and reflexes than the number of exchanges.

"Thank you."

Scarlett seemed not to understand why she received such praise after losing in just two moves.

After that, Turner sparred with Scarlett four more times.

Of course, not much was different.

If anything, unlike Ludwig, who relied solely on brute strength, Scarlett tried to play a psychological game, seeking the best move in urgent situations through quick reflexes.

Turner seemed to notice this aspect of Scarlett's technique.

"You're an excellent student; keep up the good work."

"Th-thank you."

"Next."

Turner moved on without further ado.

Shouldn't she properly teach something? Although, Scarlett was far superior to me in terms of pure swordsmanship.

However, it seemed that Scarlett did not need any specific feedback.

Her face flushed, she appeared both excited and pleased.

Naturally, Ludwig and Delfin looked on enviously, and Erich couldn't bring himself to look at Scarlett properly.

The continent's greatest swordsman had called her excellent.

What other words could be more motivating for a swordsmanship apprentice?

Those with great power and influence can change the lives of others with just a few words. Sabiollin Turner is one such person.

Scarlett would now use these words as motivation to work even harder.

Perhaps at that level, there's no need to teach in detail. Now, it was only Erich de Lafaeri and I left.

Erich hesitated.

"Go ahead."

"Uh, me?"

Scarlett had gone previously. Erich knew she was incomparable to Scarlett and probably didn't want to go next and be compared.

Why did you come here then?

The name Sabiollin Turner was enough to excite even Erich.

Erich wore an expression that said she didn't want to be embarrassed now.

"Can I go next?"

"No, no!"

Erich took a large step forward.

If she doesn't go now, she would be last.

I may be weaker than Scarlett in terms of skill, but my overall ability is definitely stronger.

"I'm Erich de Lafaeri from A-9, Royal Class, first-year."

"Royal Class?"

"Yes."

"…"

Turner looked at Erich, the tip of her practice sword touching the training ground floor.

'Hmm… she's nervous.'

'She looks clumsy… '

'Is this a student from the Royal Class?'

'Has the Royal Class standard declined to this level?'

'No, that girl earlier was fine.'

'What's going on?'

'Hmm… '

'I feel like I'm going to say something harsh to this one… '

Numerous thoughts danced beneath Sabiollin Turner's expressionless face.

“…I don't need to see you in action."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want to embarrass you needlessly. You don't need to do this."

Sabiollin Turner spoke as if she had figured out Erich at first glance.

Um…

Isn't hearing that even more embarrassing?

"Next."

Sabiollin Turner now turned her gaze to me.

The last turn.

"I am Reinhardt."

"Alright."

I picked up my practice sword.

Officially, Turner and I had met briefly. We had crossed paths at the Royal Class sponsorship event, and I had received her support.

But beyond that, there was no relationship between us. The incident at the Spring

Palace was a top-secret matter. So, although Turner knew me, we weren't particularly acquainted.

So… this was a bit strange.

"Well done. Good. It's impressive that you can deduce your opponent's swordplay from their shoulders and strides. It's a difficult sense to acquire. However, your finesse still needs work. Don't worry, though. That comes from a lack of experience. With continued training and study, you'll naturally improve."

"Good. But try a little more like this. Grip your sword more tightly… Just a bit more. A bit stronger. Ah, perhaps your strength isn't quite there yet. Hm. I see. That's understandable. You're still young."

"Excellent. To be able to do this already. However, it would've been better to do it like this. Look. Like this. Do you understand the feeling?"

"No, no. Not like that. Like this. Yes. That's it. That's it. You're a quick learner."

"A bit more, a bit more, no, one more time. Hm. You're gradually improving. Let's try it one more time."

This person…

She kept doing this with me.

No…

Why was she so blatantly favoring me?

Only now could I understand why Sabiollin Turner had agreed to teach the children swordsmanship.

It also seemed clear why she had casually passed over the others after just a few words.

She wanted to teach me something.

"Good. Good, Reinhardt. You're doing splendidly."

All the other children stared blankly at the overwhelming display of favoritism.

CHAPTER 282

How many times could it be said that the strongest knight on the continent had her life saved by someone else? Once an individual's power reached a certain level, if such an event occurred, it must have been in the distant past.

She would have lived her life as someone who saved others rather than being saved by them.

Despite the convergence of several misfortunes, in the end, I saved the life of Saviolin Turner.

Did that awaken some long-forgotten emotion within her?

Although she clearly bowed her head in gratitude, it seemed that she thought it wasn't enough.

So, she must have wanted to do something for me, thinking that watching my training while holding the title of instructor and staying in the Royal Class Dormitory would be helpful.

But it would be strange if she only taught me, leaving out the others. So, she pretended to teach the others as well, while actually focusing on me.

That's fine.

It's good.

But this…

In the end, I'm the odd one out again.

"Um, you should also pay attention to the others…"

"Ah."

Turner, who had been focusing solely on me, finally seemed to come to her senses

and turned her gaze to the other students.

'Ah.'

'I completely forgot!'

I can only hope that I am the only one in the world who can subtly read her thoughts from that cold and disheveled expression.

"Hmm, alright. You seem to be doing well enough. Now, let's take a look at everyone else again."

At my request, Turner once again observed everyone's swordsmanship. Of course, she didn't put in as much effort as she had with me, but that was enough for our level.

Both Erich and Delfin eventually received various pieces of advice.

Saviolin Turner's teachings were undoubtedly helpful, but they were excessively flattering.

Even though I am clearly worse than Scarlett, hearing such high praise is rather embarrassing. It's clear that she doesn't know that excessive compliments can be burdensome.

"Hmm, everyone seems to be doing well enough."

After another round, Turner held on to me again, teaching me this and that, and finally announced that the late-night extra lessons were over.

Everyone seemed to be satisfied in their own way. They were amazed at having seen a legendary figure up close.

Of course, she wasn't actually a legendary figure.

"We don't have much time left in the winter break, but I plan to hold these lessons occasionally. I will announce them when I have decided on the schedule, so make sure you can come to the training ground at the designated time. That's all."

The lesson was over, and I left the training ground to rest.

"Reinhardt, that was incredible. You were the only one who received such high praise from Lady Turner!"

Ludwig enthusiastically patted my shoulder as if he had received the praise himself.

He was genuinely happy for someone else's success.

Every time I realize that he truly possesses a virtuous nature, I become aware of how flawed I am as a person.

"It's just something she said."

"No, Reinhardt, you really were amazing."

Scarlett, with her eyes sparkling, rarely chimed in.

How could one say such a thing, knowing full well that objectively, they were better?

Ah…

Perhaps Lady Turner knows something I don't. Is this how it feels?

Erich was visibly disheartened.

He hadn't received a scathing rebuke or been ridiculed for his incompetence.

All Lady Saviolin Turner had said was that he would not bother with him. In the end, it was a form of consideration, sparing him humiliation in front of the other students.

It wouldn't have been possible to say he was good when he wasn't.

Erich trudged despondently towards the A-class dormitory.

Scarlett watched him silently.

She, who had once been ostracized as a witch, was an exceptional student, while he had failed to make it to the examination.

It must have been a miserable feeling.

Scarlett's gaze did not convey any sense of satisfaction.

It was merely the gaze of one person observing another - neither negative nor positive, just the gaze of a stranger.

Seeing Scarlett's expression, I became certain.

Scarlett had completely escaped from the dark emotions that had once stemmed from Erich and his actions.

It would be better to move on from that situation than to wallow in it. Scarlett seemed to have experienced a positive change.

"When will the next class be? I want to take it again soon."

“…Think about the exam period for a moment, would you?"

At my words, Ludwig scratched his head.

"I really feel like I'm not cut out for studying. I prefer using my body like this."

This crazy guy's brain must be all muscle too.

Feeling as though I might be infected by his strange energy if I stayed with him any longer, I slowed my pace. Ludwig, Scarlett, and Delfin returned to the dormitory, and I felt a hand patting my shoulder.

"Ah… Lady Turner."

"Teacher."

As if to say she was now my teacher, Saviolin Turner corrected her title with a glance.

She has always been sensitive about how she's addressed. Last time, she told me to call her Lady Turner. Now, since she's a teacher, she wants me to call her that.

"Yes, Teacher."

She quickly scanned the area to make sure no one was watching.

"I have some additional things to discuss regarding today's lesson."

It's clearly an excuse.

"Let's take a walk."

"All right."

She led the way, and I followed.

Saviolin Turner and I walked outside the dormitory.

It was night, and with the increasingly cold weather, the usually quiet Royal-class dormitory area was even more desolate.

"The Royal-class is still an interesting place."

“…Still?"

"Yes."

She walked with her hands in her coat pockets.

She is a senior from the Ephinhauser Temple. A distant senior. Of course, she too was a graduate of the Temple's Royal-class.

"Nothing was different in my time. Those who relied solely on their talent and did nothing. Those who were a little less talented but worked hard. Those who clenched their teeth and worked hard, as if something was incredibly urgent…”

She exhaled a white breath.

"And those who were born with everything."

Ellen was absent today.

Does that mean that the one who was born with everything refers to me? Have I become someone who would hear such words?

A lot has changed, so I'm not the powerless Reinhardt of the past. Hence, I could no longer deny that I was the one who possessed everything.

Not the one who brought everything, but the one who continually acquires something.

That expression would be more accurate.

"Which category did you belong to, Teacher?"

"Can't you tell just by looking?"

Saviolin Turner smiles at me.

I didn't create all aspects of her character. I don't know what her time at the Temple was like or anything about her past.

What was Saviolin Turner like during her time at the Temple, during her Royal Class days?

I can imagine without seeing it. She must have been like Ellen.

"Ellen Artorius. She didn't come today."

"Yes, she has some matters to attend to…"

She must know Ellen's true identity as well as mine. If Ellen was focusing on participating in Miss Temple instead of training, what would this person think?

Would she think it's pathetic?

She walks through the dimly lit park of the dormitory.

"To be honest, I don't remember much about my time at the Temple."

"…"

"I spent six years here, but I lived only on the training grounds. I had friends, but I can't even remember what I did with them."

Turner's gaze was empty.

She spent countless hours here, but there were no memories in any place.

She must have been a fool who knew nothing but the sword.

That time must have been converted into skill, but she had no meaningful memories left.

So, it seemed that the places that should have been filled with memories were empty.

"After graduation, I joined Shanafel and fought my enemies there. As time passed, people called me the continent's greatest swordsman, then Ragan Artorius came and took the title, and now it has returned to me."

She walks absent-mindedly.

"Just having such a title can't fill one's life."

She looks at me.

"Reinhardt, don't live too diligently."

"…"

The one born with everything.

No, rather, the one who lives as if being chased by something.

Is that how she saw me? She places her hand on a tree in the park and traces the texture of the bark downwards.

"If you live too diligently, you end up missing out on too many things."

What is she thinking? I couldn't read her emotions from her expression at this moment.

"What did you miss out on, Teacher?"

In response to my question, she opens her coat and points to the sheath hanging on

her left hip.

The Tempesta sword.

No, she must be referring to the 'sword' itself.

"Everything, except for this."

She had lived for the sword alone and had not acquired anything else in her life.

A person whose life is blank in every aspect except for the sword.

Saviolin Turner was that kind of person. Seeing her faint and sorrowful expression, I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Can't you start filling in those gaps now?"

"What?"

"Why do you speak as if you're an old lady worrying about today and tomorrow? At a glance, you could easily pass for my junior if you enrolled now."

"…?"

‘What is he talking about?’

She looks at me with the same puzzled expression.

"Well, even if you become stronger here, it won't make much difference. So, isn't it okay to have some fun now?"

"…?"

"Don't you have any vacation time?"

"I do have some… But."

Saviolin Turner nods blankly.

"Then it's not like you don't have any time at all. Try dating, eating delicious food,

and traveling. What's the point of earning if you don't spend it?"

Giving advice to someone who has experienced enough years.

In reality, this person is much older than my original self.

So what?

I'm someone who has gone as far as I can go.

"What's this? You have to have some fun to know how. Tsk."

"What on earth should I say to you?"

As if she had never heard such a thing from anyone else in the world, she looked flustered. Telling the strongest person in this world to find love if they're bored.

I must be a really strange guy.

She doesn't seem to be angry, just too astounded by the bizarre suggestion.

"You told me not to live too passionately."

"…"

"Before that, you should start living that way yourself, Teacher."

Superhumans age slowly, and once they reach a certain level, they not only stop aging but also appear eternally youthful like her.

No matter her actual age, if she wore the temple uniform, she could pass for our classmate.

Why act like you've lived a lifetime?

"…Goodness."

In the end, Saviolin Turner let out a hollow laugh, seemingly at a loss.

"I'm not sure if you're truly the future of the empire, Reinhardt."

She patted my shoulder.

"But it's clear that you're the weirdest one in the empire."

A strange guy.

That was also one of the things I heard most often.

She didn't call me just to chat without any particular reason.

"Soon, His Majesty the Emperor wishes to meet you."

The Emperor.

So it has come to this.

"I'm telling you in advance, so you won't be surprised when it suddenly happens."

Is it to express gratitude for saving Charlotte and offer a reward, or does he have a task for me?

I don't know.

But ultimately, this was also one of the things I would have to face.

CHAPTER 283

Naturally, not just anyone can have an audience with the Emperor. He doesn't meet with just anyone either.

One must consider the consequences.

For a commoner with no noble status or connection to the royal court to seek an audience with the Emperor, they must at least accomplish something like saving the life of the First Princess.

Although, in reality, this would be the second time.

That's why meeting the Emperor is an honor of a lifetime in itself.

However, I am not someone who will live their life considering this a lifelong glory.

When the Emperor requests to see me, I am filled with worry rather than honor.

The Emperor would know many secrets unknown to the masses, and there's a high possibility that even Bertus and Charlotte are unaware of those matters.

He may be able to discuss the activities of the revolutionary forces without taking sides, as well as inquire about the affairs of magical conspiracies like the Black Order.

Alternatively, he might obtain information about numerous highly confidential spells and forbidden artifacts.

Putting aside whether the Emperor will trust the information I provide, and whether he will give me the information I seek, let's consider our possible points of connection.

It could be temporary or continuous. As long as my abilities help stabilize Charlotte's condition, it will be closer to the latter.

The Emperor will want to meet me soon.

I don't know when that day will come, but I suspect it will be after the festival ends and the winter break begins.

Friday.

The final exams have ended.

"Ugh, finally! It's over!"

As expected, Kono Lint's exclamation was a predictable response to the end of this tiresome second semester.

Furthermore, starting next week is the festival. We will enjoy the festival for a week, and then the winter break begins.

Although the final exam scores haven't been released yet, I believe I will rank in the upper-middle range. Of course, I won't reach the top ranks due to my numerous absences.

From the beginning, I wasn't particularly concerned about it.

Of course, although the exams are over, for some, the real challenge starts now.

I, who will participate in the first-year tournament.

Ellen, who will participate in the Miss Temple competition.

Cliffman, who will participate in the Mister Temple competition.

And, Harriet, who will participate in the Unrestricted Class Tournament.

"Harriet, are you sure you'll be alright?"

"I'm telling you, I'm fine. I've thought it all through."

Ellen's participation in Miss Temple was surprising, but what truly astonished everyone was Harriet's decision to enter the Unrestricted Class Tournament. It's already a disadvantageous situation for a magic major, and it's not even a first-year

competition but an Unrestricted Class one.

The preliminaries begin tomorrow.

From Saturday to Sunday, the preliminary rounds will filter out the main competitors, and from Monday to Wednesday, the main tournament will take place.

Following that, the Unrestricted Class Tournament will commence on Thursday.

Winners of each grade's tournament will be granted entry to the main Unrestricted Class Tournament, but the decision to participate is left to the individual.

I haven't decided whether to participate yet, but it wouldn't be bad to try. Even if winning the Unrestricted Class Tournament is impossible, there's no harm in challenging myself.

It's ridiculous to assume victory before even attempting to win.

The first-year tournament preliminaries begin on Saturday, followed by the Miss & Mister Temple events. After that, I'll have to deal with the remaining tasks during the winter break.

Kono Lint was excited, as was Liana. She grabbed Ellen and Cliffman's hands and began to pull them along.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah."

"Uh… Do we have to…? Ah, ah, okay, okay! I'll go! I'll go!"

Cliffman tried to say something, but Liana's murderous glare drained the color from his face, and he reluctantly nodded. Liana was excited in a different way than Harriet, and her enthusiasm was evident. It's hard to imagine her ever being so diligent.

Anyway…

What should I do about Miss Temple?

Who should I choose?

I agonized between what would be beneficial and what would be realistic, and the decision was headache-inducing.

Cliffman and Ellen would not be in the training grounds today, and there would be no one there. They would probably stay at the noble's mansion over the weekend and return only when the preliminaries took place. They seemed to have obtained permission to stay at the dormitory beforehand.

Harriet went to the Magic Research Club's dormitory, so there weren't many people in our dormitory.

In any case, the first semester of the first year has come to an end today. The festival is just a festival.

Despite the cold winter weather and the absence of people near the Royal Class dormitory, the festive atmosphere was palpable. Perhaps it's just how I perceive it.

The student council had filled the festival with numerous performances, concerts, and friendly sports matches, instead of the main events, the Royal Class and Orbis Class competition. Cooperation had been sought from various clubs and even graduate students. While it's disappointing for those who were looking forward to the competition, there's not much to be done about it.

I didn't let my guard down.

With no one in the training grounds, I took special lessons from Saviolin Turner. Of course, Ludwig and Scarlett were also there.

Delfin and Erich didn't come. Both had their reasons.

Erich, that kid, seemed to be trying hard lately, but it was clear that he wasn't doing well. He had talent, but he'd played around too much until now.

Nonetheless, he had talent in swordsmanship.

I only had an aptitude for swordsmanship, not talent. But my skills were far better than those of the talented Erich.

In the end, I realized how much Ellen's presence had helped me.

It was as if I had talent in swordsmanship.

Being taught by an exceptional genius, my achievements in swordsmanship surpassed those of talented individuals.

In a way, Ellen was like a doping potion for me.

Though a year is a long time, it is too short for an amateur to surpass a prodigy. Naturally, I can't help but reassess what I've been through so far.

I remember Ellen, who began teaching me swordsmanship, saying, "That's not how you do it."

My efforts, which started in Adriana, gained momentum when Ellen intervened. If I were alone, I would have accomplished nothing. I might still be living as someone inferior to the likes of Erich.

"Good. However, when you put in full power, your precision decreases. That's an issue."

"Don't get excited, Reinhardt. Your greatest flaw is…"

'Is it disappointing to hear it called a flaw?'

It's apparent from the expression on my face. Please stop favoring me so much.

"Your Magic Body Strengthening is still quite unstable. Of course, the fact that you can do it at all is impressive. Don't take it as a criticism."

Saviolin Turner not only watched me but also observed Scarlett and Ludwig, of course.

At first, Saviolin Turner seemed a bit reluctant with Ludwig's excessive fighting spirit. To be precise, it seemed more burdensome than unpleasant.

She favored me, and it was clear that she liked Scarlett personally.

However.

"Ah, I'll do it again!"

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine! I'll do it again!"

"Maybe now…”

"No! Just one more time!"

As Ludwig persistently rose after being harshly treated, Turner's demeanor seemed to change.

'What is he? A troll?'

'He said his talent was stamina… '

'Strange… '

'What is he?'

'Scary… '

Ludwig continued to request Turner's guidance with unwavering enthusiasm from the beginning.

Ludwig is an excessively honest character. This refers not to human honesty but the honesty of conviction.

I may be lacking, but I believe I can improve.

I may be weak, but I believe I can grow stronger.

I may falter, but I will grow through it.

He's a character drawn from the sentiment of old-school comics.

Cliché and obvious, yet when confronted with such a person in reality, it's frightening.

An unbreakable human.

Someone who continues to challenge even after dozens of defeats and collapses.

"I'll do it once more!"

I thought I was relentless.

But as I watched Ludwig, who clenched his teeth, fell, twisted his wrist, took hits, and still thanked this opportunity with a constant smile, asking Turner for guidance, I felt anew that the truly relentless ones were people like him.

It's said that those who strive can't beat those who enjoy themselves.

"Scarlett, let's practice together while he's doing that."

"Ah, yes, Reinhardt."

I was the one who strove.

"Huup!"

Ludwig was the one who enjoyed himself.

The hero.

With an unbreakable mentality, standing by the one who would save the world.

-Clang!

I diligently swung my sword.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah?"

After the special class had ended, Ludwig called out to me.

"You're participating in the first-year tournament, right?"

"Yes, I am."

"Scarlett and I have decided to participate as well. Did you know?"

"Oh, really?"

It wasn't surprising, as I had expected them to participate. What was unexpected was that Scarlett, who would have originally participated in Miss Temple's event, was joining the tournament.

Pointing towards the training grounds, Ludwig said:

"I'm going to practice some more. I don't know if Teacher Turner will agree to help, though."

He grinned mischievously.

"If I lose to you too pathetically, it'll be rude, right?"

Ludwig seemed to believe that he couldn't beat me.

Nevertheless, he would give it his all. That's the kind of person he was.

Let's put in the effort.

Live kindly.

Be honest.

He seemed to be made of such common, clichéd sayings turned into a person.

"I'll be going then! Good luck with the preliminaries tomorrow! I'll do my best too!"

"Alright."

Ludwig had become much stronger than his original self. It was the reward for not getting tangled up in troublesome matters.

But as I got tangled up in more troublesome matters, I gained strange advantages.

Thus, having been caught up in numerous strange incidents, I was definitely stronger than Ludwig now.

However, would I be able to remain stronger than Ludwig in the future?

He, with his unrealistic mentality, had no limits. Surely, he must have traits akin to a hero's bloodline as well.

It seemed that Teacher Turner was aware that Ludwig was no ordinary person. Although Turner appeared to be slightly burdened by him, their synergy was ultimately not bad.

Since he met her earlier, Ludwig would become even stronger at an incredible pace.

Turner might have held these special classes with the purpose of teaching me, but in reality, they would lead to Ludwig's rapid growth.

He would probably cling to Turner throughout the entire break. Although Turner might not be fully aware, she would probably not refuse Ludwig's request for help.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah, what is it?"

In the B-Class dormitory hallway, Scarlett called out to me.

"Would you like to have a meal?"

"A meal?"

I realized I hadn't eaten dinner due to the special class. Still, it was surprising to hear Scarlett say this.

"Her Highness Charlotte suggested we have dinner together if we have time."

Ah, so that was it.

No wonder she didn't seem keen on additional practice before the tournament.

Since Charlotte had returned to the dormitory, we had both been cautious around each other, merely exchanging greetings when we crossed paths and not engaging in any deeper conversations.

CHAPTER 284

Scarlett, Charlotte, and I stepped out onto Main Street.

No news is good news, as they say, and it seemed particularly true at this moment. If Charlotte didn't come looking for me, it meant she was safe.

And so, up until this point, with no news, Charlotte's expression had been bright, as if nothing had happened.

The winter sun had set early, and darkness had already enveloped the night.

But the bright lights shining here and there, along with the upcoming festival, had transformed Main Street into a bustling hub of activity.

"Wasn't the festival supposed to start on Monday?"

At my question, Charlotte laughed.

"The restrictions on entry lift on Monday, but the business and traffic restrictions lift on Friday. Those with Temple access passes can enjoy the festival a little earlier."

According to her, the festival had already begun in all but name.

During the festival period, the once impregnable Temple would open its gates to the public.

Of course, security forces would be significantly reinforced, but for the people of the empire, this week-long festival offered a rare glimpse of the fantastical Temple beyond the massive walls.

However, the streets were not yet swarming with civilians.

It was the preparatory period of the festival.

Brilliant lights, as well as street vendors and tantalizing scents emanating from all directions, filled the slightly more animated streets of the Temple.

There were people buying food on the streets, and some students could be seen practicing their performances or singing.

"The regular classes must be busy preparing for various events, but thanks to someone, the busiest Royal Class gets to take a break during this festival, don't they?"

Charlotte grinned mischievously.

"Then you should be grateful."

"Ah, right. I should have expected that response."

Even though the regular classes were in a frenzy preparing for the festival, the Royal Class, which should have been the busiest, was able to leisurely stroll around on the eve of the festival with nothing to do.

"Let's try that."

As I had noticed before, Charlotte wasn't particularly picky when it came to food. At her suggestion, the three of us ate some deliciously aromatic grilled chicken skewers from a street vendor.

In fact, it seemed she genuinely enjoyed street food rather than just not being picky.

"Ah, it's hot!"

"Who's going to steal it from you? Eat slowly."

"I didn't know it would be this hot."

Charlotte carefully nibbled on the scorching hot chicken skewer, blowing on it gently.

She was eating it in such small bites that it looked like a tiny mouse was nibbling away at it.

How strange.

It was unbelievably cute.

Scarlett also took her time eating her chicken skewer. I took one bite and just held

onto it.

“…Somehow, I'm the only one eating so enthusiastically."

Charlotte glanced back and forth between Scarlett and me as she said this.

I was, in name, from a beggar's background.

Scarlett was actually from a beggar's background.

"It's too sweet."

"How sweet could it be?"

Charlotte tilted her head in curiosity, and when I offered her a bite, she looked flustered.

"Uh… why?"

"Go ahead, try it."

"Uh? Uh-uh?"

"What's so strange about trying it? Is it dirty?"

"Ah, no? That, that's not what I meant…”

"Say if you don't want to."

"Ah, no! What do you mean by 'dirty'!"

As I tried to take it back, Charlotte grabbed my arm and took a big bite of the chicken skewer in my hand.

It seemed like she was forcing herself a bit.

Scarlett's eyes widened at the scene.

Really, it's just this little thing. Is it such a big deal? With her face flushed, Charlotte stuttered, lowering her head.

"It's not even that sweet?"

"It's a matter of taste."

"You're really picky about strange things, aren't you?"

Charlotte looked at me as if I were a strange creature, then turned her gaze to Scarlett, who was taking small bites of her chicken skewer.

"Why is Scarlett not eating?"

"It's too spicy for me."

I must have picked up a spicy one by chance. As Charlotte stared intently, Scarlett hesitantly offered her chicken skewer.

"Would… would you like to try it?"

Charlotte took a small bite of the tip of Scarlett's skewer and began to chew.

"…"

Her face started to turn bright red.

Hmm.

I thought Scarlett's reaction was a bit mild, so the spiciness must have been bearable. It seemed I was wrong.

"…"

"I'll go buy some water."

"I… I should have warned you…"

Charlotte couldn't even chew properly, her mouth hanging open slightly.

What is this?

What did I just eat?

That was the expression on her face.

We sat down by a nearby fountain to rest.

Charlotte, still seething with anger after gulping down the water I had bought, continued to rinse her mouth.

"Why do they sell that kind of thing? They should at least give a warning! Who would eat that!"

She touched her lips and pouted.

"It's not just spicy, it hurts. My lips hurt."

"Can't you eat spicy food?"

"Do I have to?"

"There are people who enjoy it. We bought the best-selling skewer earlier."

At Scarlett's words, Charlotte's mouth dropped open.

"Why would they?"

"I don't really know."

Though Main Street sold all kinds of food, the Royal Class dormitory and the palace dinner we had eaten before had little to do with spicy flavors.

They led lives that seemed to have no connection to things like chili powder.

Scarlett was slowly eating the chicken skewer that she had claimed was too spicy.

Was she good at eating spicy food, or did she not enjoy it but forced herself to eat?

"Didn't you say it was spicy?"

"Yes."

In response to my question, Scarlett took another bite.

"It's a waste to throw it away."

"…"

"…"

Charlotte and I exchanged glances.

It couldn't help but be a touching statement.

So what does that make me, who threw mine away earlier? Scarlett and Charlotte nibbled away at their respective chicken skewers.

I had thrown mine away because it was sweet, but there was another reason as well.

"Can't you eat more neatly? It's dripping all over!"

This is why I handed them tissues.

I was about to wipe it off myself but held back.

I despise when it smears on my clothes. It's so viscous that it trickles down.

"What! When did it spill so much?"

"Uh, yeah…"

Both Charlotte and Scarlett were startled as they wiped the sauce that had stained not only their skirts and lips, but also their hair.

In the end, they both started eating with a peculiar posture, leaning their necks forward.

A princess and a pauper eating chicken skewers in the same manner, both smeared with thick sauce.

What a sight to behold.

"Ugh, it tastes good, but it's so uncomfortable to eat."

After throwing the remaining skewers into the trash, Charlotte shook her sauce-stained clothes. Of course, it didn't become clean from that.

"But experiences like these are what it's all about, right? Let's go! Let's eat something else!"

Excited, Charlotte took the lead. Scarlett smiled as she watched her.

"Lately, you seem to be in a good mood for some reason."

Charlotte and Scarlett have grown close in Class B. Of course, Charlotte probably hasn't told Scarlett much. That's why they feel close, but there's still a considerable distance between them.

Still, she knew that Charlotte regarded Scarlett as important.

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm glad."

Scarlett seemed to think highly of Charlotte as well.

Charlotte indeed looked happy.

It was then that they seemed to understand why Charlotte had invited them on a Friday evening.

Once the real festival starts, there would be too many people, making it difficult to move around.

The tournament preliminaries start from tomorrow.

Even with a bracelet that prevents mental interference, I have my own affairs, and Scarlett has hers, so we'll be busy.

"Doesn't that look delicious?"

Charlotte wanted to enjoy the festival with us in advance.

Her platinum blonde hair, running through the streets, shimmered brilliantly as it

caught the lights of the winter night at the temple.

Rather than settling in one place to eat, we tried various street foods as we explored.

Instead of one person ordering three items, we shared one dish.

It was both stir-fried noodles and a soft drink.

"It's great that we can try a little bit of everything."

This experience must be a first for Charlotte, but she seemed to enjoy it.

Scarlett, on the other hand, was the most flustered. Drinking from the same straw as Charlotte, she seemed more surprised by Charlotte's nonchalance than anything else.

We came across quite a few nostalgic items.

"The, the taste of memory…"

"…Not a particularly good memory, though."

We each took a sip from a coconut with a straw after buying one upon seeing them being sold. Scarlett looked at the coconut with a bewildered expression.

"Was it always this tasteless…?"

"That's what I'm saying… No, is it a different variety? The taste is too different from my memory!"

"It's a glorified memory."

"…Is it?"

In the scorching summer on a deserted island, the taste of coconut water as a substitute for drinking water surely wasn't like this. Even now, it was winter.

In a place overflowing with food and drink, the coconut was nothing more than a strange, foul-tasting juice. Charlotte laughed, perhaps reminiscing about her time on

the deserted island.

"Ha, I thought my clothes were messy with all these stains, but it's nothing compared to back then."

Regardless of being a prince, a princess, or a grand duke's daughter, everyone had been in the same pitiful state.

I experienced it in Class A, while Charlotte endured that moment commanding Class B.

"I remember when the rain was pouring so heavily that I thought it was the end."

"I did too."

"When Asher summoned light with his divine magic, it felt like we had been saved."

"Yes, I felt the same way."

The two discussed their mission in Class B.

"Ludwig caught dozens of fish from the first day… He's quite something. If only he used his head a bit more."

"I still think he has many strengths."

"Ah, I didn't mean he had a lot of weaknesses."

"I know what you mean."

From their conversation, it seemed like Charlotte usually led the conversation and Scarlett added comments or chimed in. Scarlett seemed like a good listener. Charlotte looked at me, perhaps worried that I felt left out.

"Reinhardt, you were amazing back then too."

"I didn't do much."

"I heard from Bertus that without you, half of us would have been wiped out on the first day."

I didn't know Bertus had said such things.

At first, it was surprising that the two of them even had a conversation. They didn't outright ignore each other, but there was tension between them.

Honestly, I didn't lead from the beginning or give up, I just took action in front of those who did.

As a result, Bertus started leading the shaky group.

In the end, I didn't do that much.

With Bertus's leadership, the camp formed with Harriet and Adelia's magic. And Ellen's hunting.

During the last orc hunt, Ellen and Harriet practically did everything.

Of course, starting is half the battle, and I can't deny that it was important that I initiated it.

Charlotte, holding the coconut which tasted different from what she remembered, took a sip through the straw.

"This year felt very long."

Charlotte gazed up at the night sky.

The street lights were so bright that the stars weren't visible.

This year was a monumental one for humanity, as the war against the demon world ended and the demon world was destroyed.

But in a different sense, this year felt very long.

For both Charlotte and me.

Many things happened.

At the end of the year, leaving only the festival behind in the final days of the second semester at the Temple, I tried to wrap up the year while preparing for the last

remaining event.

Charlotte clutched the coconut tightly in her hand.

While it didn't taste as good as she remembered, it was still undeniably reminiscent of the flavor etched in her memory.

"Let's do well next year, too."

"Yes."

"We must."

We must do well, no matter what it takes.

When asked if she would participate in Miss Temple, Charlotte said she had no intention of doing so. She reasoned that whether she was elected or not, it would be laughable either way.

If she were to be elected, it would be mainly because of her status as a princess, and if she were to lose, the winner would undoubtedly feel uneasy.

Of course, Olivia didn't seem like someone who would care about such matters.

In any case, Charlotte didn't seem to have any plans for the festival.

However, if Charlotte were to participate in the tournament, her victory would almost certainly be guaranteed.

While she didn't know the extent of her own abilities, she had managed to corner Saviolin Turner. It was unclear if she could only use her powers in the specific condition of darkness, but regardless, it was impressive.

Of course, the possibility of Charlotte, who was afraid and resentful of her own powers, participating in the tournament and wielding her shadows was slim.

Friday passed, and Saturday arrived.

The Royal Class dormitory felt empty.

Ellen, Liana, and Cliffman were likely at the Grantz Ducal Mansion. Harriet and Adelia seemed to have spent the night at the magic research club, doing who-knows-what. Bertus appeared to have returned to the Imperial City.

Currently, only Heinrich, the hopeless trio, and I remained in the dormitory.

Breakfast time.

As we ate, Heinrich, who had been dining nearby, glanced at me.

"The preliminaries start today?"

"Yeah, they do."

Heinrich, who had become less confrontational since the Edina Archipelago incident, was more at ease.

There were no restrictions like major limitations or prohibition of Supernatural Powers in the tournament. Both Heinrich and Liana could participate without issue.

However, Liana seemed more interested in dressing up, and Heinrich had not registered to participate.

He clicked his tongue.

"I would have entered if you weren't competing."

He seemed to have given up on participating since he knew he would lose to me. Somehow, hearing him say that so casually felt oddly irritating.

Heinrich seemed to have unwavering faith in my victory. The hopeless trio listening nearby didn't seem to have any differing opinions either.

Kono Lint suddenly looked around.

The female students, who usually scolded him whenever he made a ridiculous remark, were absent from this spot.

"Hey, there's another thing."

Kono Lint whispered, glancing around. At his words, Kaiyer's curiosity was piqued.

"What is it?"

"A cross-dressing contest."

“…Huh?"

"Cross-dressing?"

"Yeah, they have that too. It's not as big as Miss Temple or Mister Temple, but there's a contest where men dress as women and women dress as men."

At that, Erich furrowed his brow.

"Are they insane? Why would they hold something like that?"

"Well, it happens every year, so I guess it gets a good reaction."

A cross-dressing contest.

Just hearing about it was disconcerting.

I glared at Kono Lint.

"Shut up, anyone who participates or watches such a thing must be a pervert."

That's what I, who had once transformed into a woman and confessed to Kono Lint, said…

I feel dizzy.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Damn it.

And I'm worried.

I feel like something is going to happen.

I'm anxious about a possible event!

[Event Occurred - Cross-dressing Contest]

[Objective: Win the Cross-dressing Contest.]

[Reward: Magic Power +5, Increased Magic Resistance]

Ah…

This is really disconcerting…

You scoundrel.

I don't know what you're up to, but I don't understand why you're doing this to me.

"Are you Reinhardt, first-year Royal Class, student A-11?"

“…Yes."

"Your registration for the cross-dressing contest has been accepted."

Seriously, you're going to pay for this.

CHAPTER 285

At the registration desk for the cross-dressing competition in the Temple's main hall.

I had pulled my hood down deep to make sure no one would recognize me.

"Um, excuse me, Teacher."

"I'm not a teacher, but is there something else you'd like to say, Reinhardt?"

Please, don't say my name!

I'm somewhat famous, and someone might recognize me by my name!

There were students all around me, registering for various contests, and here I was, standing at the empty cross-dressing contest registration booth!

They're looking at me with those eyes!

Oh, look at that person… Are they really participating?

How embarrassing.

At least they had the sense to wear a hood.

But, in the end, they'll have to show their face during the contest.

That's what their gazes seemed to say!

"Um, about the cross-dressing contest… Can you keep my identity a secret…?"

"Ah, so you want to participate but keep your identity hidden, is that correct?"

Please, don't say it so loudly!

But the receptionist seemed to understand, and offered a quiet smile.

"Please refer to this pamphlet for detailed contest information. Rein… Ah. Um. Hmm."

Sister, don't look at me like that.

Are there many people like me…?

No, I have my reasons.

That stubborn fool wouldn't listen to my achievement points, so he ended up saying he'd raise my power if I participated. How could I not take that offer?

I quickly left the Temple's main office after completing my registration, worried someone might see me.

"Damn it…"

I muttered under my breath, hurrying to avoid being seen.

This is so humiliating.

So humiliating, so humiliating.

So humiliating!

Thankfully, I didn't run into anyone I knew.

—---

If the fact that I participated in the cross-dressing contest becomes known, it's all over.

Why did you participate in that?

There's absolutely no excuse for it!

People who participate in and watch those contests are all considered perverts, and if it's discovered that I participated…

It's practically a death sentence.

You… actually enjoyed that kind of thing?

Ellen, Harriet, Olivia, Bertus, Charlotte.

Everyone I know would be shocked.

But there's no way they'll find out. I asked for my identity to be kept a secret, and I'll be introduced as an unidentified cross-dressing man.

It's written as such in the participant's pamphlet.

[If a participant requests protection of their identity, the organizers will 'absolutely' guarantee secrecy.]

It's a contest prepared for those with peculiar hobbies as well.

I'll change my face with a ring… If I'm caught later, I'll just say it was good makeup… Of course, I shouldn't be caught in the first place.

No one will recognize the unidentified cross-dressing man as Reinhardt since I'll be participating with a different face. There's no reason for the royal class guys to attend the cross-dressing contest either.

The announcer suddenly says it's first-year royal class student Reinhardt!

As long as they don't say anything like that, I'll never be caught.

I just need to be careful of people like Kono Lint.

Should I threaten them, saying I'll kill them if they go to the cross-dressing contest? No, if I say something like that, they might suspect that I'm participating.

With a surge of magical power level 5, there came an increase in anti-magic resistance.

It was a tremendous stride towards mastering magical power, and yet, the reason for the increase in anti-magic resistance seemed somehow obscure.

It was certainly a good thing, and the likelihood of victory had greatly increased.

Why couldn't they just be happy about it?

Why did they always have to go through such antics when trying to share their power with others? Just give it for free! Why did the reward have to be greater when enduring humiliation rather than risking their life in battle?

"Next up. The preliminary match between Royal Class first-year A-11, Reinhardt, and Dardia Class first-year C-32, Olanken von Istua. Please take your positions."

Their mental state was so shaken that they could hardly focus on the current situation.

This was a preliminary match to determine the finalists in the first-year tournament.

In the enormous preliminary match arena, not only here but all around, matches were taking place.

They couldn't even make out their opponent's weaponry or face.

Their mind was in turmoil.

So much so, they felt they might lose control.

"……”

The other side, being from the Royal Class, seemed visibly nervous.

"Begin."

With the referee's signal, they charged straight at their opponent, discarding the practice sword they had been holding.

In their current state, holding the practice sword felt like crossing a line.

They opted for their fists.

They had just heard their opponent's name, but they had already forgotten it.

"Sorry, friend of unknown name."

Thud!

"Argh!"

"Reinhardt wins!"

Anyone facing them today should consider themselves unlucky!

They were incredibly irritable!

Whack!

Thump!

Thud!

Crash!

In the C-group preliminary match venue, a monster was rampaging.

"What… what is that?"

"They're from the Royal Class…"

They had no weapons. Regardless of whether their opponents wielded swords, maces, or spears, they charged in at a speed that was almost impossible to follow and finished the fight in one swift move.

Weapons generally meant distance. If one secured the advantage in distance, they had the initiative.

That's why, in the battlefield, swords were more advantageous than bare hands, and spears more advantageous than swords.

Yet, despite willingly embracing the overwhelming penalty of fighting barehanded, they charged and overpowered their opponents without giving them a chance to attack – in a situation where a single effective hit would result in defeat.

"No matter how skilled they are, they're still a first-year, just like us…"

"They're quite famous even among the Royal Class."

Like most students, they admired the Royal and now-defunct Orbis classes.

Admiring the Orbis Class wasn't a matter of great envy. Those students had earned their positions through hard work.

However, the perception of the Royal Class was different.

Talent.

They were the ones who entered solely based on their talent.

As such, they were targets of envy and contempt. Not as much as the Orbis Class members, but there was still envy as everyone admired them.

But after witnessing the monster that ended every fight within five seconds, all the while wearing a permanent scowl, everyone couldn't help but change their minds.

The overwhelming physical prowess that renders all the weapon techniques learned by the students so far meaningless.

Is that what it means to be a part of the Royal Class?

What have we been learning all this time? What have I been tirelessly training for?

The existence of the Royal Class evokes a sense of injustice, but witnessing their abilities firsthand induces self-deprecation.

What does it mean to aspire to be a knight and major in close combat? There's no way we can be on the same level as that monster.

And, reluctantly, we have no choice but to accept it.

At that level, such treatment seems only fair.

If there's a place that breeds monsters like that, a place with individuals that can render us entirely powerless.

It's only natural for the empire to grant them special treatment.

"I… I want to forfeit. How can I beat someone like that?"

Even though he's not their direct opponent, those in Group C will ultimately have to face that monster.

Students who forfeit without even fighting begin to emerge.

Group C of the preliminaries.

The group I am in.

We compete in a tournament-style preliminary within each group, and the ultimate winner of each group advances to the main event.

There will be a total of thirty-two main event contestants.

Over the weekend, thirty-two group preliminaries will take place.

I fight whenever I am called upon, going wherever they ask me to, and participating in the preliminary matches.

Before I know it,

"Due to the last contestant's forfeit, the winner of Group C is A-11, Reinhardt from the Royal Class."

I stare silently at the back of the contestant across from me, who doesn't even consider fighting and leaves the arena.

Only then do I look around.

All the students eliminated from the preliminaries are staring at me as if I were some monster.

I check my condition, without a single drop of sweat or a scratch on me.

In the examination hall, I notice the distance between me and the students looking at me with awe.

Is this the distance?

Even though they say there are those in the Royal Class who are no different from the regular classes.

In the end, it's a place with individuals possessing incomparable talent and skills.

Those who disdain me as a worthless individual, drowning in self-pity like Erich de Lafaeri, would easily subdue those people if they were to participate in the preliminaries here.

I see the distance I feel from their gaze.

I am very far from these people.

I've grown distant.

I know that gaze.

I know what that gaze signifies.

That gaze was the one I occasionally gave Ellen.

Unknowingly, I have become someone who is looked at with that gaze, rather than looking at someone with it.

The way they look at me is too distant.

It's a gaze that sees me as a being from a different dimension, one they can't even acknowledge as the same human.

I can never be like them again, not now, not ever.

Group C champion. I easily secured my spot in the main event.

In the main event, contestants are divided into four groups—A, B, C, and D—with eight participants each.

The winner of each group fights against the winners of the other groups to determine victory or defeat, and the last ones standing battle for the championship

trophy.

In the preliminaries, I didn't encounter anyone from the Orbis Class or Ludwig.

The organizers must have had their considerations, balancing each group. They wouldn't foolishly place all the contenders with high chances of advancing to the finals in the same group.

After all, this is a tournament and a spectacle for the festival.

The highly favored winners wouldn't be placed in the same group during the main event either.

Therefore, in the main event, I wouldn't meet Ludwig or any potential Orbis Class participants from the start.

If it's an Orbis Class representative, it's highly likely that it would be first-year A-1, Grayden Amorel.

Originally, he would have been the runner-up, defeating Ludwig and then losing to Ellen in the finals. I wonder if he participated.

If he did, could I win?

If my Magic Body Strengthening works properly, I should be able to compete.

In Ludwig's case, I would win, but for Grayden Amorel, I would need to take it more seriously.

The grade-level tournament is held on Monday and Tuesday. The main event group matches take place on Monday, and on Tuesday, the semi-finals, finals, and ranking matches are held for the group winners.

On Wednesday… well, there's the cross-dressing contest.

On Friday, the festival's grand finale, the Mister and Miss Temple contest and the Unrestricted Class Tournament final are held.

The Unrestricted Class Tournament preliminaries will also take place today and tomorrow.

The Unrestricted Class Tournament is, in fact, the biggest attraction.

After the grade-level tournament winners are determined on Tuesday, the Unrestricted Class Tournament main event will proceed from Thursday.

I plan to participate.

Meanwhile, I wonder how Harriet is doing…

I know she has her preliminaries today.

I won easily because I was against first-year students, but it wouldn't be surprising if Harriet were eliminated in the Unrestricted Class Tournament, which is mostly attended by upperclassmen.

If she can't even make it to the main event, wouldn't she be really hurt…

Contrary to my expectation,

"You won?"

Harriet nonchalantly shrugged her shoulders.

“…How?"

"What do you mean 'how'? I won all the matches, so I'm the winner."

What exactly did she do?

Did Harriet manage to overpower upperclassmen in close-quarters combat?

Harriet refused to tell me and stuck out her tongue before dashing out of the dormitory, apparently heading to the Magic Research Society mansion.

How did she manage that in just a few days?

No.

No, that's not it.

'I will try harder.'

Harriet had been working to become stronger for a long time. Even before that, she had been striving since she was upset about not being able to go with us to Darkland.

Harriet had been continually trying to become a magician who could hold her own, or more precisely, to become accustomed to fighting.

This must be the result of her efforts.

By the way, that girl.

Did she specifically come to the dormitory to brag about winning her group preliminaries to me?

Why is she so adorable?

Sunday.

“…Your Highness, I must have misheard."

"You heard right…”

"…”

I had indeed raised my voice at Eleris many times before.

However, this time, even Eleris seemed unable to understand. I understand, though. I certainly, certainly understand.

"You need a dress…?"

"That's what I'm saying…”

It would be strange if this made sense.

A cross-dressing contest.

I need clothes. A wig might be necessary as well. Of course, I could use Sarkegaar's ring to make my hair longer.

If it were Liana, she might be shocked that I'd participate in such a bizarre event but would eventually laugh and help me try on various outfits.

Obviously, there's no way I could choose that option!

Considering how Ellen and Cliffman would view me for the rest of my life, I feel like strangling myself.

But, of course, I don't have an eye for these things.

That's why I'm confiding in Eleris, the only person I've told about this.

I'm asking her to help me choose a dress.

"A cross-dressing contest…?"

“…That's how it turned out."

"Why…?"

Eleris's lips were quivering.

Our child… was already strange, but now they've become even stranger…

Her gaze is like that.

"Anyway, it's an incredibly important and necessary thing for me. It's difficult to explain in detail."

“…Is it related to the future?"

"Well, you could say that…”

To be precise, it's related to my growth. Eleris was still visibly confused.

"I… I can't possibly see the connection between Your Highness cross-dressing and preparing for the future… I just can't…”

Eleris's pupils were shaking violently. Eleris… I'm a million times more distressed than you are…

"But you must have a plan, Your Highness."

A plan, indeed…

Some bastard said that if I win the cross-dressing contest, my abilities would skyrocket… that kind of dog-like plan…

"I… Good luck, Your Highness."

Eleris seemed to know that I wasn't taking this lightly, watching my expression as it withered.

Eleris comforted my shoulders, which were slowly dying in misery.

As expected, the only one who understands my heart is Eleris.

CHAPTER 286

The cross-dressing contest, although a ludicrous and baseless competition, still bears the title of a contest. It is officially organized under the endorsement of the Student Council and the Temple's approval.

Of course, there is prize money for the winner, and the competition is well-structured.

Thankfully, there are very few participants, so there's no need for preliminaries.

Men dressed as women don't have to partake in absurd activities like appealing their charm to qualify for the finals.

The contest proceeds directly to the finals. Participants take turns coming out in order, showcasing their appeal, and then returning. The winner is determined through voting.

While it is impossible to become a completely different person, by slightly altering one's face, wearing entirely different clothes, and changing the atmosphere, no one who might recognize me should be able to tell.

That's because I have Sarkegaar's ring, a cheat key to prepare for this situation…

As humiliating as it sounds…

There's no way someone prettier than me could exist in that place… (?)

So, first, I need a dress for the contest.

And I need to decide on what kind of ridiculous thing I should do to appeal to the audience…

Should I dance? Or sing?

Honestly, I want to cry. I've experienced countless instances of injustice and sorrow since living here, but this is the first time I've felt so wronged that tears might

actually fall.

Why… Why are they doing this to me?

I must not be exposed as Reinhardt. I must be unrecognizable even if someone looks at me. I also need to suppress my usual hot-headedness.

If I suddenly lose my temper and cause chaos, someone might suspect, "That person might actually be Reinhardt."

While the majority of those attending the contest won't know me, there's a possibility that someone might have heard of my infamy. Also, Kono Lint is likely to attend with high probability.

Eleris returned after not too long.

Empty-handed.

"Um… First, about the dress… I went to the boutique, and most of their dresses are custom-made… They said we need to take measurements and make the dress… They do have some pre-made ones, but they might not fit you…"

"…"

My height is around 181 centimeters.

I can change my appearance using Sarkegaar's ring, but adjusting my height could be risky in case of unforeseen circumstances.

Why did you participate in the cross-dressing contest?

No, but you were shorter back then, right?

What did you do?

I may hear such questions, so it's better to appear shorter.

"Let's go with a dress that has a long hem. I can pretend I was bending my legs. We can make myself look shorter that way."

"Ah, you mean a hoop skirt?"

I don't understand the term, but it seems that what I had in mind is called a hoop skirt.

I reduce my height using Sarkegaar's ring. If I wear a voluminous hoop skirt dress that hides my legs, I can later use the excuse of bending my knees if I'm exposed.

With my height reduced, the chances of someone recognizing me will be even lower.

All that's left is for the organizers to keep the secret well.

It's frustrating to have to prepare for the possibility of being discovered, but there's no choice. My body shape can be adjusted considerably, so rather than finding clothes that fit me, I can make my body fit the clothes.

Eleris said she would go back to the store again.

"Um, the sleeves should be long too."

If my arms are visible, wouldn't that be strange as well? Hearing my words, Eleris trembled her lips and nodded her head.

"Ah, um, yes… Your Highness."

Damn it.

Really, damn it.

I hate how I'm seriously considering what I should do to properly cross-dress!

Still… I have to win, don't I?

I have no choice if I want to win… If I end up in second place half-heartedly, I'd feel like committing suicide…

As I waited for Eleris to return with the dress, I stared blankly at the ceiling with my mouth open.

How should I appeal…?

Someone, please kill me.

In the end, preparing for the cross-dressing competition consumed my entire Sunday.

I should be focusing on the main tournament that starts tomorrow…

Why does it feel like I'm taking the cross-dressing competition more seriously?

Eleris brought back a catalog of dress designs from the boutique, which we looked through. The design was an issue, but it was more important for the sleeves and skirt to be large. We chose a hoop skirt, a wedding dress style.

We then purchased the dress and put it in a trunk to bring back.

It was a continuous feeling of self-disgust, but I couldn't just ignore it.

As I said.

There's no point in half-heartedly placing near the top if I'm not properly prepared.

If I don't win first place, this ridiculous endeavor will be a waste.

"…"

"…"

At this point, I had tried on the dress Eleris had bought. The most important condition was included.

Being able to put it on by myself.

So, right now, I was wearing the dress Eleris had bought.

Without changing my face, I adjusted my height to fit my hair and dress length.

To ensure nobody would recognize me, I changed my usual blonde hair to a completely silver color. If the hair color is drastically different, my impression will

change significantly.

Eleris was looking at me with a warm expression.

“…Say something."

If it looks ridiculous, say it's ridiculous!

"I can't understand why Your Highness has to do this…”

Eleris trembled her lips as if she was in trouble.

It's not surprising that the lord of the demon realm is having his cross-dressing examined by a subordinate, it would be strange if he didn't experience a mental breakdown.

"But, still… It strangely… suits you well."

Damn it!

Don't be proud of it!

"The important thing is this. Can you recognize me?"

"Um? Since you've only changed your hair color… Your impression hasn't changed much…”

Of course. After all, my original face is the same, and I haven't even applied makeup, so there's no way they wouldn't recognize me.

"Do you want to look in the mirror?"

"…”

I don't want to look.

I loathe looking at it.

"Show me…”

Still, I have to see.

Eleris summoned a reflective barrier in the air. My reflection appeared in the magical mirror.

In the mirror was a haggard Reinhardt (with silver hair and wearing a dress) who seemed to carry the weight of the world's troubles and worries.

I feel nauseous.

Dizzy.

Why am I… Why am I doing this?

Was this my comeuppance after all? It all started when I used the trick of transforming from Sarkergaar's ring and receiving a confession from Kono Lint, right? The trickster didn't even know the possibility, but I showed it, didn't I? Thinking about it, this is all my fault and my retribution?

Sadly, because I made the appearance of Reinhardt quite handsome, it didn't look terribly strange.

However, the problem was that even if I looked, anyone who knew me would be able to recognize me at close range.

The next step was necessary.

"May… may I start?"

Eleris carefully laid out the makeup tools she brought in front of me.

Eleris claimed she didn't know anything about applying makeup. It was a skill she had no reason to learn.

So, while browsing for a dress at the boutique, she said she learned how to apply makeup using her elemental powers.

I wasn't sure how much she learned in that short period, but I didn't need to worry. Eleris was Eleris, so she would do well.

The problem was that she would apply makeup on my face instead of her own.

For now, I took off the uncomfortable dress and slumped into a chair.

I had tried on the dress, so I didn't need to wear it anymore.

The only time I would wear it after this was during the cross-dressing contest's main event.

"Phew… Alright. Let's do it."

"Yes…"

It felt like being led to the gallows.

If I were to participate in the Miss Temple event, the situation would be better. I could just transform into a completely different appearance. It would actually be more comfortable that way.

However, this was a cross-dressing contest that I signed up for under Reinhardt's name.

I had to achieve the bizarre goal of maintaining Reinhardt's appearance as much as possible while appearing as a completely different person. The organizers would keep my identity a secret, but they knew who I was. If a completely different person showed up, they would find it suspicious.

So, I changed the color and length of my hair and said it was a wig.

And then there was makeup. With heavy makeup, I could look like a completely different person. Surprisingly, Eleris seemed to be doing quite well considering she learned it in a short time. Her manual dexterity was far beyond average. She probably had seen it done before, even if she hadn't done it herself.

I had no choice but to entrust my face to Eleris with a dying expression.

The important thing was, Eleris couldn't enter the Temple.

There were two methods.

Either learn the makeup techniques from Eleris or go to Eleris on the day of the contest, get the makeup done, and return to the Temple.

Both options were terrible.

"…"

Both Eleris and I seemed to be dying a little with each passing moment.

Eleris appeared to have no idea what she was doing, her eyes spinning wildly, but she was applying makeup to my face regardless. And as for me, there was no need to say anything.

However, as Eleris applied more and more makeup, her expression became increasingly bizarre.

Her face seemed to be saying, "What on earth…?"

"Why are you making that face? It's making me uneasy."

"Well… um… it's just that…"

Eleris's lips trembled.

"It suits you too well…"

"Give me the mirror."

I could see my nearly finished makeup.

"Damn it."

Even I had to admit.

The makeup worked too well.

It wasn't just that Eleris had done a fantastic job with the makeup; it was also that the base material was already good enough that no matter what was done, the

outcome seemed to be precisely what was desired.

After all, Reinhardt's face wasn't originally my face. If you get down to it, it was just a customized character's face.

A face that could be changed easily.

I couldn't quite remember what the original Valier looked like. Of course, if I were to compare, both versions were fine.

Having spent more time as Reinhardt, this face felt more like my own.

Anyway.

It was irritating that it looked so strangely good.

That was the problem.

"No matter how I look at it, I still look like Reinhardt."

"That is… true."

Reinhardt's face wasn't deliberately made to be imposing, but it had become so over time.

So, it felt like a real-life version of "What if Reinhardt were born a girl?"

Even if I couldn't recognize myself immediately, anyone who knew me would inevitably say, "Isn't she Reinhardt's sister?" or "Does Reinhardt have a sister?"

I couldn't help but imagine Kono Lint asking me to introduce my sister to him.

It was the worst…

There were limits to what makeup could do. It made me look plausible, but it didn't hide me well enough.

Now, it was time for the final step.

"First, I have to do something about these detestable eyes."

I made very subtle adjustments, like fine-tuning a sculpture. I used the power of the Sarkegaar ring.

I slightly refined the unpleasant-looking eyes, slimmed down the jawline, and made very small, incremental adjustments without making it too obvious.

I put self-loathing aside for the moment.

I will win.

No matter what it takes, I will win!

It took an age to finish the fine-tuning while looking in the mirror.

I stored this appearance in my memory, just as I had done with Reinhardt's.

By the time I finished all the work, I felt as if my eyes were about to fall out.

"Your Highness."

"What?"

"Now, it seems that if you were not a girl… it would feel strange… I think… Um, I'll stop now."

As Eleris praised me, I felt even more defeated, so she stopped speaking.

Right.

If this face weren't a girl's… that would be even stranger…

"However… the more I look at this, it's either Reinhardt's older sister or younger sibling…"

"Yes…"

Since I couldn't change the overall structure, no matter how I changed the hair color or minutely adjusted the face, it would inevitably become a derivative of Reinhardt.

And I couldn't completely overturn it either.

It was hellish. Eleris hesitated and opened her mouth with difficulty.

"Your Highness… I think I know what the problem is…"

"What is it?"

"Your expression."

Eleris pointed to my face in the mirror.

"It's your expression that's the issue."

My expression in the mirror was that of someone dying, and it was clear that I was under a lot of stress. My nerves were on edge, ready to explode at any moment.

That's right.

That's the default expression of Reinhardt Mk.I.

My typically sullen face wasn't due to my naturally unpleasant eyes, but rather, the expression I wore that made my eyes seem that way.

Now, with the stress of preparation, my already unpleasant expression was ten times worse.

Therefore, I was now in a state that was ten times more like Reinhardt than usual.

"Could you… try smiling…?"

"…I'm really not in the mood to smile right now."

How could I not laugh after all this, looking in the mirror?

I tried, but it didn't work.

The corners of my mouth trembled, threatening to rise but not quite making it.

Forcing a smile was harder than I thought.

Damn it, practicing smiling in the mirror like I'm preparing to be an announcer?

"More, um, brightly…"

"I'm trying…"

My mood was plunging into the depths of despair, yet I had to create a bright, smiling expression.

It was pure torture.

Eleris was right in pointing out that the expression was the problem.

"Indeed… It seems to be effective."

Just by changing my expression, I looked like an entirely different person.

I didn't even resemble Reinhardt anymore.

So, as time passed and the night wore on, I practiced smiling in Eleris's basement room until midnight.

Finally.

"At this level… it seems perfect. You look like a completely different person."

"Really…?"

In the mirror, my mental state had been reduced to dust and scattered, but my expression, at least, was disgustingly bright and cheerful.

Even I could see it.

I absolutely didn't look like Reinhardt.

With this, the preparations for the cross-dressing competition were complete.

This is what it feels like to have bile rising in your throat. No, it's worse, like having bitter water come up.

That night, I almost cried in my sleep.

No…

I really did… shed a few tears.

CHAPTER 287

On the outskirts of Saint-Thion, a provincial city of the Saint-Thuan Duchy.

Adriana was readjusting to life in the monastery. A tranquil and peaceful life, much like a wagon wheel. The hustle and bustle of her days in the temple seemed to be a distant memory, and Adriana's daily life was now serene.

"Sister, the abbess has summoned you."

"Ah, I see. Thank you."

Adriana left the prayer room at the call of another nun and slowly walked down the silent hallway.

A place with no reason to hurry.

A place where everything is quiet and ancient.

It might not be considered a joyous place, but Adriana was adapting once again to this environment and was content.

There were faces that occasionally crossed her mind, but she had left them behind.

Now, she had to forget them.

-Knock knock

"Abbess, it's Adriana. I was told you called for me…"

-Come in.

Abbess Melia of the Saint-Thion Monastery had cared for Adriana since she was a young girl and was, in essence, no different from her own mother.

Of course, when Adriana was very young, someone else had been the abbess, but Melia had taken over the position when the previous abbess had passed away.

Melia regretted that Adriana had returned from the temple. She had sent her there hoping she would use her talents to help more people.

However, Adriana had ultimately chosen to come back, and while the abbess was saddened, she did not blame her.

Sitting in a library filled with books and devoid of any decorations, Abbess Melia of the Saint-Thion Monastery looked at Adriana with a warm smile.

"Please, have a seat."

"Thank you."

Adriana sat on a wooden chair, and Melia took the seat opposite her.

It was a simple, unadorned place.

The only valuable items here were the books. The Saint-Thion Monastery was not only difficult for thieves to enter, but even if they did, they would likely leave empty-handed or even abandon their own belongings.

The host of this humble abode for believers, Abbess Melia gazed at Adriana with a gentle smile.

"How are you finding life in the monastery, Adriana?"

"I enjoy it, Abbess."

"Is it difficult to adjust?"

"No, everyone treats me well, just like before…"

Since returning from the temple, Adriana had received much attention and care from others, so she had no problems interacting with people. Even the abbess had been periodically calling Adriana in to make sure she was adjusting well.

"Do you regret leaving the Temple? If you change your mind, I can speak to them on your behalf."

"I'm fine, Abbess."

Though not forceful, Melia occasionally inquired about Adriana's willingness to return to the temple. However, Adriana's response was always the same.

She did not want to experience any more turmoil. Adriana thought that spending her remaining days here would be the best thing for her.

"Is that so…? You still seem quite certain about that."

"Yes."

Adriana had no desire to return to the Temple.

It would be a lie to say she had none at all, but for now, she was content with the present. Melia stood up, leaning on the table.

"Shall we go for a walk together? It's been a while."

"Yes, Abbess."

Adriana enjoyed conversing with the Abbess about various topics, so she promptly stood up to join her.

Melia didn't head to the inner part of the monastery but went outside instead.

On the outskirts of the regional hub city, Saint-Thion, in the Saint-Owan Principality.

Aside from the Saint-Thion Monastery, there weren't many places for people to gather, so the area surrounding the monastery was a vast plain.

Dry grass fluttered in the wind on the plain now that winter had come.

"It's quite chilly."

"Ah, thank you, Abbess."

When Melia placed her hand on Adriana's shoulder, a faint white light wrapped around Adriana's body, providing warmth.

The two walked together across the frost-covered plain, not in their cloaks but embraced by warmth derived from divine power.

"Adriana."

"Yes, Abbess."

"It's been almost a year since the Demon King fell."

“…Yes, that's right."

This was a story that took place after a great saga had ended, following an event humanity had never expected to happen.

The demon realm that had threatened humanity for a long time had collapsed, and the Demon King was defeated by the hero.

Humanity had achieved the victory they had long hoped for. Adriana didn't know why the Abbess suddenly brought up this topic. However, Melia had always started with such stories before offering Adriana helpful advice, so Adriana silently walked by her side.

"With the Demon King's fall and the disappearance of all the demon tribes that served the demon gods, humanity's wishes have been fulfilled, as well as the wishes of our believers, haven't they?"

"Yes."

The demon tribes that served the demon gods.

If the demon tribes were the enemies of humanity, the enemies of those who believed in the Five Great Gods were the forces of the demon god's religion.

Now that the demon tribes that believed in the demon gods had fallen, those among humans who followed the demon gods would also be destroyed. Adriana couldn't disagree with the claim that this was a victory for the Five Great Gods' religion.

"However, I believe that this victory is also a crisis."

"A crisis…?"

Adriana tilted her head.

Melia gazed at the winter plain with deep eyes.

"The empire has begun to fear the power of our faith."

"Ah…"

"They see the possibility of rebellion in the Holy Knight Order, who have gathered to fulfill the will of the gods and perform their holy duties. How unfaithful and untrustworthy they are."

Adriana had never heard Melia speak of such things before.

"The empire needed the power of the Five Great Gods' religion to achieve victory in the war against the demon realm. Now that the hunt is over, they seek to oppress us, just as one would boil a hunting dog alive."

"Oppress… What?"

"Yes, the Empire is trying to step into areas that cannot be invaded, and they already have."

Melia turns her head to look at Adriana. The look in her eyes was not the gentle and kind gaze of her mother Melia that Adriana always remembered.

It seemed as if anger and hatred were breathing within.

"From the moment they replaced the Holy Knight Order's commander at their whim, the Empire's ambition has already been revealed, hasn't it, Adriana?"

"…!"

At those words, Adriana felt like she was choking. Trembling, Adriana cautiously speaks.

"Th-that's because… the previous commander… committed a crime…"

"Adriana, that's just the Empire's propaganda."

Rumors spread, and the truth becomes distorted.

"The previous commander achieved the great feat of subjugating the demon realm. The Empire, fearing that the Holy Knight Order might cause a rebellion, had to keep them in check."

Upon hearing those words, Adriana couldn't help but widen her eyes.

The commander had been caught attempting to torture his own daughter, and was dismissed due to the criminal evidence.

The Empire replaced the commander with fabricated rumors and manipulated evidence to keep the powerful Holy Knight Order and its commander in check.

While the latter was mixed with falsehoods, the Empire did have such intentions.

People believe in tasty rumors, not credible ones.

The latter was a tasty rumor for believers, stating that the Empire's persecution of the Five Great Religions had begun.

But Adriana knew the truth.

She and Reinhardt had discovered the truth. While they had learned the truth from another classmate, it was very close to the actual situation.

The abbot did not know that he was directly involved in the matter and believed that the replacement of the Holy Knight Order was due to the Empire's schemes.

"More than anything, as long as the successor to the Holy Knight Order's commander is a pro-empire figure, there's no need to explain any further."

This place was far too distant from the Imperial Capital.

The dismissal and replacement of the Holy Knight Order's commander was perceived by many religious people as religious oppression.

Riverrier Lanze was a hero of the Demon War. Although his actions led to the dismissal of the commander position, it inevitably caused resentment among the majority of the religious community.

In reality, the dismissal of the commander was not decided by the Empire and could

not have been.

The religious community believed that the decision made at the Five Great Popes' conference was due to the Empire's pressure.

"Adriana. It's a virtue for a religious person to not get involved in politics. But when politics start oppressing religion, it's an issue we must pay attention to."

That's why Abbot Saint-Thion Monastery Melia, who had never spoken about politics her entire life, now talks about politics because she believes the Empire is oppressing religion.

Melia stares deeply into Adriana's eyes.

"The Holy Knights Order now exists as a unified organization for the transportation of the five major religions' followers, in the absence of the demon realm. Some faithless people misunderstand this, wrongly judge the Order's intentions, and believe that the Holy Knights Order threatens the empire, attempting to disband it."

The Holy Knights Order, a united force of the five major religions.

It was an unprecedented organization.

Though the Order was created to subdue the demon realm, its nature didn't allow it to be disbanded just because the demon realm disappeared.

The Holy Knights Order also played a role in gathering the members of the five major religions, facilitating communication among them.

If the empire tried to disband the Order arbitrarily, there would be serious consequences.

However, even though the empire hadn't said anything, religious figures like Melia already believed that religious oppression had begun.

The battles between demons and humans began in a similar fashion.

Neither side intended to attack the other, but they prepared powerful armies, imagining that the other side would attack.

Thus, the Great Demon War broke out.

When people start believing in non-existent violence, they naturally prepare for violence.

"We can't just stand by like this, Adriana."

"A-, Abbess…"

"We must unite the power of the five major religions and stand against the empire."

Adriana felt both fear and doubt at Melia's words.

The Saint-Thion Monastery was not a military organization. Adriana couldn't understand how they were supposed to join forces, what was going on, and why she was being told this story.

"Adriana, the 'Nameless Monastic Order' needs you."

The Nameless Monastic Order.

It was a name Adriana had never heard before.

Melia quietly grabbed Adriana's hand and led her somewhere.

"Adriana, I'm afraid to send you off alone, but the person you're about to meet promised to protect you as much as possible, so you don't have to worry. They said there won't be any danger."

"Wh-, who… who am I going to meet…?"

In the midst of the winter wind.

As Adriana crossed the hill, she saw a carriage parked by the roadside and a few people standing beside it.

Though they were all unfamiliar faces, there was one person whose face Adriana recognized.

Then.

Adriana seemed to understand why the Abbess of the St. Thion Monastery on the outskirts of the empire had told her such things. Melia held Adriana's hand gently.

"You've been wronged by the empire's schemes, and now only the task of regaining your honor remains."

Adriana seemed to understand why Melia felt relieved to entrust her to someone.

There was no reason to be afraid of entrusting herself to that person if she didn't know the full situation.

"Are you Adriana?"

"…"

Adriana couldn't help but turn pale as she looked at the middle-aged man with a cold expression.

Former Holy Knights Order leader, Riverrier Lanze.

He stared quietly at Adriana.

It was evident just from his gaze.

Riverrier Lanze clearly knew that Adriana was involved in his dismissal.

He had found out.

However, Abbess Melia didn't know this.

"She's kind and well-behaved, but also strong-willed, Leader. I entrust Adriana to you."

"Don't worry. I'm aware of her excellent potential."

That's why she handed Adriana over to Riverrier Lanze so easily. She believed that Riverrier Lanze was innocent, so she entrusted Adriana to him.

Melia, who had been trusted and followed like a mother, had become a member of a secret society with an unknown identity. Riverrier Lanze placed a hand on Adriana's

frozen shoulder.

"There's no need to be so nervous, Adriana."

Adriana couldn't even open her mouth, trembling with fear. Riverrier Lanze's cold gaze stared at Adriana.

"Anyone would think you've committed a terrible mistake."

Why was he taking her?

What was Riverrier Lanze planning?

Adriana couldn't understand any of it.

CHAPTER 288

Monday.

The long-awaited Temple Festival had begun, and for me, it was a week filled with various tasks to resolve.

From today onwards, for a whole week, the Temple would be open to all civilians.

Of course, the majority of visitors were parents who had come to see their children at the Temple. As students from all over the continent gathered, parents arrived to meet their children during the festival. There were also people who were simply commoners from the Imperial Capital but had come to enjoy the Temple Festival.

In any case, the safety of the Temple students was the top priority, so there were restricted areas, and security was significantly strengthened compared to usual.

However, regardless of the solid security, the influx of countless visitors remained the same.

The Temple opening its doors to civilians meant that the festival period was when the Temple was most vulnerable.

Although there were no accidents this year, chaos erupted during the festival at the end of next year when the Gate was on the verge of collapsing.

Still, it was uncertain whether that would happen or not.

If the changed history had any influence, an accident could occur this year as well.

The Black Order coming to the Temple to find me would be easiest during this timing. However, they had not acted yet, whether they were coordinating opinions internally or not.

If they came, I would respond accordingly. At least, I was confident that they wouldn't try to kill me.

Anyway, Monday.

Although it was the festival period, it was not a holiday yet.

Cliffman, Ellen, and Liana had all returned to the dormitory.

All students of the Royal Class had gathered in the main hall, following the instructions of the student council.

In front of all the gathered Royal Class students on the first floor, the student council president, Ceres Van Owen, stood on the stairs.

"From today, the Gladius Temple Festival will take place for a week."

As she was addressing the entire school, she used a formal tone.

"Originally, the Orbis and Royal Classes would participate in the opening ceremony at the Great Stadium. However, as you all know, not only the opening ceremony but also all official events and schedules during the festival have been canceled this year."

"Thus, very exceptionally, the Royal Class will be granted unlimited free time during this festival period. Students who wish to participate in tournaments or festivals individually are free to do so."

"This year, just enjoy the festival. Do what you want and play if you wish. Throughout the year, you all have worked diligently, so you may participate in activities to evaluate your accomplishments or simply take a break and relax."

"There are no precautions for official events, but I will convey general precautions."

"Currently, a significant number of civilians have entered the Temple. They are people of various backgrounds and statuses. I urge you not to cause unnecessary disputes with civilians and avoid being involved in disputes as well."

"During the Temple Festival, there are always numerous conflicts between students and civilians. These conflicts may arise from the mistakes of students or civilians alike. If an unidentified civilian attempts to exert unfair pressure on any of you, seek help from the nearby guards, and they will take immediate action. The security has been greatly reinforced, so you will be able to find the Temple Guard in any location. Of course, the same measures will be taken if any of you were to exert pressure or

force on others."

In short, the message was not to cause trouble nor to tolerate it. After finishing her speech, Ceres Van Owen looked down at the students.

"As the Royal Class Student Council President, I hope this festival will be a successful conclusion to your year."

The festival is an event for all Temple students who have worked hard throughout the year to enjoy. So, after having fun, they can embrace the winter break with a relaxed mind.

Of course, for me, this break after a year of hard work felt more like the last hurdle to overcome the year.

I test how much my skills, which were nonexistent at the beginning of the semester, have improved through the tournament.

If I win the first-year tournament, I will test how far I can go in the main event of the Unrestricted Tournament.

Miss and Mister Temple.

And even the dreadful cross-dressing contest.

I just need to get through this tough time and take a short break.

"I hope you enjoy the festival. That's all."

The festival began with the applause of the students. At that moment, some students excitedly rushed out of the dormitory as if they had been waiting for this, while others returned to the dormitory with indifferent expressions, seemingly uninterested in the festival.

Harriet was moving with a group for the time being.

They were members of the Magic Research Society.

-"You guys have fun. I'm fine."

-"No, it's okay. Let's go quickly."

-"I'm really fine…"

-"There's still a lot to improve. The main event is not far off, so we need to polish it further."

The first-year members of the Magic Research Society gathered around Harriet.

-"Junior! Are you practicing again today? Aren't you going to have fun?"

Redina joined them as well.

-"Ah, yes… I'm planning to do that. You can go to the festival, senior…"

-"No, this is more fun!"

-"That, that is…"

It seemed like the Magic Research Society was pushing Harriet to participate in the Unrestricted Tournament.

They didn't say how they managed it, but Harriet had won the group preliminaries for the Unrestricted Tournament and advanced to the main event.

I didn't have much confidence either, but Harriet pulled it off.

The fact that Harriet's combat ability is at that level means there is a high possibility that her fighting skills are at least on par with mine or even better.

Despite being beaten, bruised, and rolling around in pain, Harriet felt the desire to become a skilled fighter and was well on her way to achieving it.

Thus, instead of enjoying the festival, Harriet seemed to be focusing her efforts on preparing for the Unrestricted Tournament. It appeared that the members of the Magic Research Society were helping her as well.

Students of the same major gathered together, producing a synergy separate from the tasks I had assigned.

It was a good thing.

Before heading to the Magic Research Club, Harriet and I made eye contact.

She might be able to come to watch, but Harriet would be busy with her own matters.

For some reason, she gave me an apologetic look before she left the dormitory.

Well, it's not really a big deal, and I don't think there's a need to feel sorry about it.

Harriet left the dormitory.

I was at the very back of the line for the A-class dormitory, and Ellen was at the front.

She must have spent the weekend trying on various outfits and contemplating what to do at the Miss Temple event.

She turned her head and looked at me.

Having left the Temple on Friday and returned late last night, it was the first time we had seen each other's faces in a few days.

Although she must have tried makeup at the Grantz family's residence, Ellen was, of course, bare-faced and dressed in her usual school uniform.

“?”

When Ellen stared at me, I averted my gaze.

Yet, somehow, she seemed prettier than usual, or perhaps it was just my imagination.

"Ellen! Come to my room. I just received new makeup I ordered this morning."

"Ah, okay."

As Ellen stared at me quietly, she was dragged away by Liana's arm.

"Do you always have to be called?"

"Ah, uh, yes…”

"Isn't it about time you learned to do it yourself? Why are you so hesitant?"

"Sorry…”

With Ellen in her right hand and Cliffman in her left, Liana dragged them both away.

Even as she was being pulled along, Ellen kept staring at me.

Was she contemplating whether or not to come and watch the tournament today?

Somehow…

Rather than enjoying themselves, everyone seemed busier than usual.

It was a festival, but it didn't feel like one.

That was the feeling I got.

"Reinhardt!"

"Woah!"

"What now?!"

Suddenly, Olivia hugged me from behind, making me jump in surprise.

"Let's play together! There are so many things I want to eat and do!"

Olivia looked at me with her eyes sparkling.

"I'm busy today because I have the first-year tournament finals."

"Right! Can I come and watch today?"

"You can come if you want, or not if you don't."

As Olivia said that, she caught sight of Ellen being dragged away by Liana in the distance.

"Is she participating in Miss Temple?"

"Yes… that's what I heard."

Olivia let go of my arm and looked back and forth between me and Ellen.

"Are you going to vote for her?"

I couldn't give any answer, and Olivia pinched my cheek.

"You can't even make an empty promise, you dummy."

Olivia laughed heartily, and then she disappeared somewhere.

Monday.

Numerous events, performances, and activities were taking place all over the Temple, but I was far from the dazzle and bustle of the festival.

Today was the day of the first-year tournament finals. The finals for each grade's tournament would take place in the same arena, and the seats would be filled with spectators.

I was placed in Group A for the first match.

There were a total of 32 first-year students who made it to the main tournament.

The tournament would consist of the round of 32, the round of 16, and the quarterfinals.

I had to play three matches, with the semifinals and finals scheduled for tomorrow.

To prepare for the first-year tournament, I moved with Ludwig and Scarlett.

Needless to say, both Scarlett and Ludwig passed the preliminary round.

Ludwig looked at the tournament bracket and smiled happily.

"It seems the groups were divided by chance. How fortunate."

I was in Group A, Scarlett in Group B, and Ludwig in Group C. We wouldn't face each other until we were the winners of our respective groups.

If we were to face each other in the tournament, it would be at least in the semifinals.

"Is it really by chance?"

"Or did they purposely arrange it this way?"

Ludwig…

I'm responsible for making you like this.

"Of course, if they put all the championship contenders in one group, there wouldn't be anything exciting to watch later on."

"Ah, I see…"

There were a total of four main groups.

In Groups A, B, and C, there were competitors from the Royal class.

And in Group D, I saw a familiar name on the bracket.

Grayden Amorel.

Though the Orbis class had disappeared, he had transferred to a general class and participated in the tournament.

There might have been other names from the Orbis class, but I didn't recognize any. Names like Nils Oniana, Lilka Eren, or Ender Wilton.

Someone with an unknown name could have participated, but for now, I confirmed that Grayden Amorel was in Group D.

I wonder who will face Grayden Amorel if we win our main group matches.

It's still uncertain.

We were on our way to the stadium where the main tournament would take place. Today, we would play three matches, and tomorrow, the semifinals and finals would be held.

Ludwig was chuckling.

"Our friends are coming to watch later, what if I get nervous?"

There were only two main tournament participants from Class B. So, except for a few, the group was coming to watch the tournament. More specifically, to watch Ludwig and Scarlett's performance.

It seemed like everyone from the Magic Research Club would come, except for a few.

I wonder about my side.

I doubt Ellen and Harriet would be able to make it…

Even if Olivia were to come, she seemed a bit angry earlier, so I'm not sure if she will come.

What about Charlotte? Since there are students from Class B, would she come? If so, she might not be coming just to see me.

No, whether they come or not, I should just focus on my tasks.

Why do I feel somewhat sad?

Why do I feel like I'm the only one without parents attending a sports day where everyone else's parents are coming?

Have I been with kids for too long? I really don't feel much different from them now.

"Reinhardt! Let's do our best!"

"Uh."

A stiff response slipped out unintentionally.

CHAPTER 289

The temple was overflowing with people, to the point where it was difficult to avoid stepping on someone's foot. Not only were there more students than usual, but the incoming crowd was also tremendous.

Despite the temple's typically tranquil and ancient atmosphere, seeing it bustling with people evoked a fresh sense of excitement.

Perhaps due to the large number of people, a certain degree of commotion could be sensed amidst the cheerful chatter. There were students getting into arguments with passers-by or outsiders being arrested by guards, all the while shouting, "Do you know who I am?"

Amidst the chaos, there was no semblance of order.

Scarlett, Ludwig, and I pushed our way through the crowd, heading for our destination.

The main stadium of the temple.

A circular arena used for important matches and events.

With its massive size and seating capacity exceeding thirty thousand, the stadium was the venue for significant sporting events and tournaments held within the temple, like the one taking place today.

Today, the temple would host the main matches of the annual tournament.

It was only natural for giant screens to be set up for the audience.

Tomorrow, the semifinals and finals would be held here, as well as the main matches for the unrestricted class tournament.

As members of sports-related clubs, this was a space they could proudly enter, but I had never been involved in such an event until now.

The royal class, who would come to watch the tournament, would arrive later, and as participants, we had already arrived ahead of time.

"There are so many people…" Ludwig muttered in astonishment, his eyes wide as he surveyed the crowd gathered at the entrance of the stadium to watch the tournament.

"Well, the tournament is one of the main events of the festival," I replied.

Scarlett interrupted, "Wait a minute, Ludwig. So, does that mean there won't be any seats left for the people coming to see us?"

"Don't worry, Ludwig. The royal class has the privilege of entering events beyond the normal capacity," Scarlett assured him, seeming well-informed on the subject. The numerous privileges granted to the royal class within the temple were innumerable.

"Oh, I see. But what does 'beyond capacity' mean? How can people enter if the seats are already full?"

"Just think of it as reserving special seats. Would it help if I said they're seats that aren't included in the regular capacity? That's the privilege granted to the royal class."

"Ah! I see!"

For a brief moment, I could sense a flicker of disdain in Scarlett's expression.

Human relationships were truly unpredictable…

Why had the relationship between the main heroine and protagonist turned out this way?

Although Scarlett didn't dislike Ludwig, she occasionally regarded him as a somewhat lacking friend.

This must have been my doing, as well.

The Gladius Temple Annual Tournament Main Event.

We were heading not for the entrance for spectators but for the one reserved for

those with official business.

As the identities of those who had advanced to the main event were already shared among the organizers, we simply had to submit our identification cards to be guided straight to the players' waiting room inside the stadium.

The athlete's waiting area was as grand as the massive stadium itself due to the strict prohibition of spectator access.

Naturally, it was equipped with various amenities, exercise equipment, and first aid supplies for injuries. Security guards were also perfectly in place to ensure safety.

There were a total of 36 contestants advancing to the main competition for each grade level. With all grade levels gathered, the total number exceeded two hundred. Individual rooms were even prepared to accommodate all of them separately.

We were guided to the waiting room designated for first-year students.

"Once all the main competition contestants have arrived, we will provide instructions and announcements. Until then, please feel free to relax in your individual waiting rooms or in the hall."

After being told that we could approach the desk anytime if we needed anything, the three of us settled down in the hall.

Ludwig seemed impressed by the magnificent athlete's waiting area, which didn't pale in comparison to the Royal Class dormitory. Scarlett felt the same way.

It seemed that some people had arrived before us, as we could see individuals either resting or preparing themselves.

However, most of them were alone.

They were the chosen ones from the numerous classes in the temple. It was impossible for a single class to have three members advancing to the main competition like the Royal Class.

Hence, they all regarded each other as rivals, remaining tense and cautious

regardless of the comfortable environment.

Most of them were either lost in thought, warming up, or engaging in their own mental training.

Even though they were all high school first-year students, it was akin to a national team selection event.

It was a competition to determine the strongest seventeen-year-old within the temple. Exaggerating a bit, it was an event to identify the strongest of their age group on the continent.

It was only natural for them to be tense.

"Reinhardt! Want some bread?"

Ludwig, seemingly oblivious to the tension, cheerfully offered bread he had found somewhere.

Scarlett and I exchanged glances.

"…"

"…"

It seemed that we shared similar thoughts.

But you…

You were originally with him…

No, never mind.

"Uh, sure. Give me a piece."

"This is delicious."

"Um, I'd like some too."

In the end, Scarlett also took a bite.

-…

The wary gazes of those around us turned toward us.

In a place filled with individuals who saw everyone around them as enemies, the three of us, who seemed to know each other well, huddled together and ate bread.

Three contestants who appeared to come from the same place.

In such a case, there was only one possibility that they could think of.

They couldn't help but realize that we were the ones from the Royal Class.

Suspicion, hostility, and fear.

Numerous gazes pierced us.

"Uh, um…"

Ludwig finally seemed to notice the gazes around us, while Scarlett quietly nibbled on her bread.

"What's with you guys? Haven't you seen people eating bread before? Either join us or stop staring!"

In the end, I couldn't stand the stares any longer and snapped at those around us.

However, this place was ultimately a gathering of individuals who had stood out in their own circles.

Unlike other amateurs, these people were full of pride and confidence in their abilities and possessed no small amount of self-esteem.

"What did you just say?"

In this tense situation, with nerves stretched taut, there were more than enough people who would step forward and confront someone who made the first move. Leaning on the sofa with one arm, I grinned at the approaching guy.

Is that guy even a high school student?

He seemed to be about two meters tall.

Of course, that didn't intimidate me.

I wasn't sure about the others, but this particular guy had been glaring at us with particular disdain.

"I asked if you've never seen someone eat bread before. What makes you think you're so special?"

"This punk. You don't seem to have the air of a Royal Class graduate. You must be mistaken, thinking you'll win by default because there's no Orbis Class."

As the atmosphere suddenly turned hostile, Ludwig stepped in.

"Ah, ahahaha. Re, Reinhardt. Calm down. Why are you suddenly like this? I apologize. My friend is a bit sensitive."

"…"

"…"

The guy alternately looked at Ludwig and me, and I glared back at him.

"Who are you, and which group are you in for the main tournament?"

"Group A, Reinhardt."

"Lucky you. I'm in Group A too."

With a smug expression, the guy slapped his hand and taunted me.

"What's so lucky about that?"

I laughed at his demeanor.

"It's not going to work out for you."

Why does he think he's lucky when he's bound to lose?

I can't understand it.

Eventually, after the mind game was over and the nameless guy had backed off, a voice came from behind.

“…You still attract trouble wherever you go."

“…Ah, you."

"It's our first conversation, but it seems you remember my face?"

Of course, I do.

Even though we hadn't spoken, his face was one I'd remembered. Scarlett and Ludwig, seeing him for the first time, tilted their heads in confusion.

"You may not know my name, though. It's Grayden Amorel."

He extended his hand to me. There seemed to be no hostility in that gesture.

"Uh… long time no see."

I felt somewhat apologetic to him, for my antics had ultimately led to the loss of the special privilege known as the Special Class.

Grayden Amorel sat on the sofa opposite me, where we were seated.

"I used to be an Orbis Class first-year, but that's gone now."

Upon hearing that, Scarlett and Ludwig seemed to understand why we knew each other and expressed an "aha" look.

Grayden Amorel didn't seem to harbor any other emotions towards me. In reality, the internal accusation against Lilka Eren was not something he had done alone, but something the entire Orbis Class first-year students had agreed upon.

Originally, he was known to have a rather cold personality, but considering he approached me first and offered a handshake, it seemed he had undergone some

change during the time we hadn't met.

Although I could not pinpoint exactly what those changes were, they were there.

"I thought you'd enter the tournament."

"Really?"

"I'm not sure why, but I just had that feeling."

The cheeky fellow, Ludwig, joked about the authority of the bread.

"So, the first-years… are scattered?"

"Yes, but we're still within the temple, so it's not like we can't meet if we try."

The first-year students from the Orbis Class were dispersed into regular classes.

However, it seemed that Grayden Amorel took the initiative to create a club through the student council, establishing a gathering for the first-year students from the Orbis Class. After all, clubs were a gathering of students regardless of their class.

Since they had gone through hardships together, it was not easy for their relationships to fade away.

Unprompted, the fellow mentioned that Lilka Eren was doing well. He playfully joked that he was going through a late growth spurt, claiming that he seemed to be growing taller, but in reality, he hadn't grown at all.

"In a way, I think it's a blessing that things turned out like this. Honestly, it was hellish."

Though the Orbis Class had vanished, it seemed that they were all getting along well.

Strangely, this thought comforted me.

Despite the numerous changes and accidents that arose from the problems I caused, it seemed there was always some positive change somewhere.

Grayden Amorel was in Group D.

The four of us sitting here were the strongest contenders for victory.

I had met Grayden Amorel before, but this was the first time we had conversed.

Yet, it was clear that he harbored some sort of goodwill toward me.

"Of course, I have no intention of losing, Reinhardt."

This was a competition, and we all understood that.

"The main stadium of the temple is fortified with powerful protective and barrier magic. Consequently, there are a few special events that can only occur here."

"All participants in the tournament's main event will be protected by powerful magic."

"From now on, the battles you fight will not be conducted as practice duels. If you find yourselves in a life-threatening situation, powerful protection and summoning magic will activate, transporting you to a safe place. Of course, this will result in a loss."

"In short, there will be no serious injuries or deaths, even if you use your full power. Thus, the Gladius Temple Tournament will create an environment that is 'very close to real combat,' pushing participants to their limits."

"While this is the explanation, the message I want to convey is simple."

"Think of this as an actual battle, and use every means at your disposal to win. There is no such thing as cheating."

"Of course, injuries like bruises or broken limbs may occur. However, no loss will be declared for any injury that can be treated. Remember, you won't lose just because you get punched once."

The 36 first-year contenders listened intently to the explanation provided.

This tournament would be different from the countless practice duels that Ellen and I had participated in before.

Though the stadium was equipped with protective magic and barriers, as well as numerous safety devices for participants, we would still have to fight as if we intended to kill our opponents. The arena ensured maximum safety so that we could give our all in battle. This would not only entertain the spectators, but also showcase the combat abilities of each participant to their fullest extent.

Ultimately, it was all for the sake of a thrilling spectacle.

The display of extreme combat would demonstrate the kind of monstrous talents the Empire had nurtured.

Tension rippled through everyone's expressions, even the usually relaxed Ludwig, as the reality of the upcoming tournament sunk in.

"Once you're called, be prepared," they were told.

The Tournament of the 36.

Today, they would determine the winners of the main rounds.

"Group A, first match. Royal Class first-year A-11, Reinhardt. Dalron Class first-year C-2, Lageres. Prepare yourselves."

I was participating in the very first match of not just the grade-level tournament, but of all the upcoming festival tournaments.

As the saying goes, there's nothing better than a spectacle of fire or combat.

The Temple's main stadium.

With a capacity of thirty thousand seats.

Seeing it completely filled, I initially thought I wouldn't be nervous, but I was wrong.

How could so many people gather for a children's fight? Even if the tournament for grades one through six was fully booked until tonight, were there truly this many interested spectators? Some couldn't even find a seat and had to stand to watch.

Was this truly entertaining?

Ah.

It was then that I realized, no matter how advanced this world may be, there was no existence of mass media like television, smartphones, or the internet.

In a world where stimulating entertainment was rare, the sight of the Empire's nurtured talents engaging in swordplay was quite a spectacle by their standards.

My face and that of my opponent appeared alternately on the large screens installed throughout the Temple's main stadium.

"Ohhh!"

The strange exclamation from the audience when my face appeared.

This.

It felt odd.

I tried to see if there were any familiar faces among the thousands of spectators, but there were too many to recognize.

Everyone was watching me.

I felt strange searching for someone who might have come to see me.

There probably wasn't anyone.

Everyone was busy.

Yet, strangely enough.

Among tens of thousands of people, where it should have been impossible to find anyone familiar.

Somehow…

Far away, I saw a black-haired girl with a calm expression.

It was Ellen.

Ellen was watching me.

Beside her were Liana, Cliffman, and Harriet.

And, despite their undoubtedly terrible relationship, Olivia Lanze was there as well.

"Reinhardt, you're the best! So handsome! Aaaah!"

And next to them, there were the students from Class B as well.

Charlotte was looking at me with a gentle smile. She didn't say a word, but it was clear that she was rooting for me.

Of course, probably for security reasons, even Saviolin Turner was sitting next to her. She had her arms crossed and watched me silently.

Unknowingly, a smile spread across my face.

-Stay strong.

I could read Ellen's lips.

-Wi-win… Win, win!

Although stammering, Harriet made a trumpet with her hands and cheered.

Not only Harriet, but also all the members of the Magic Research Society, including Redina, were present.

-Junior! Keep going!

What? I thought everyone would be too busy to come.

But everyone was here.

Despite the terrible relationship between Ellen and Olivia, they sat next to each other, leaning away from each other as much as possible.

Everyone was gathered.

"Hoo…"

The weapon in my hand was not a practice sword but a real one.

I was told to choose a weapon that suited me, so I picked a longsword with the same weight as the one I used in Darkland.

My opponent was also armed with a longsword.

-Now, the highly anticipated Gladius Temple Festival, the first-grade tournament in Group A! The first match! It starts now!

-Wow!

As the announcer shouted, amidst the thunderous cheers,

Right.

It's the first match, so I have to show them something interesting.

Sorry, friend.

I have to show my friends, who came all the way here despite being busy with their own matters, what I've been doing for the past year, right?

I believe.

I cast, Mana Enhancement.

-Krrrr!

An explosive force surged through my body, and blue flames erupted from me. As the sound of the cheers grew louder, I saw my opponent faltering.

Adding swiftness, strike, and hardening,

Self-Suggestion, Mana Enhancement.

With all of these combined,

"I will win."

Adding the power of the Word to it,

I took one step forward.

With just a single step,

-Kwoooong!

"!!!"

In the next moment, I had reached right in front of my opponent.

Victory.

I desire nothing more than that.

-Wow!

“…Was it really necessary to come and watch this?"

Amidst the cheers, Harriet grumbled discontentedly.

The third match of the first-year Group D had just ended. The match featuring Reinhardt, which they had come to watch, had ended in less than five seconds.

There was still plenty of time left until Reinhardt's next match.

The first-grade round-robin tournament would end, and then the second-grade round-robin tournament would begin.

There was no need to watch all 36 matches for every grade, but given Reinhardt's performance, it seemed likely that all his matches would end in an instant like this.

Thus, during Reinhardt's match, the audience was overwhelmed, but their confusion

was more prominent.

"No, what's with that one?" The reaction was like that. It was overwhelming, but it felt somewhat bland.

In terms of entertainment, it was more enjoyable to watch the desperate fights where people stumbled and rolled on the ground.

So, they actually came to watch Reinhardt's match, but there was little need to see him in action.

Both Ellen and Harriet were busy. However, in the end, after debating whether or not to come, they eventually arrived.

With a displeased expression, Olivia reluctantly sat down next to them when they ran into her midway.

The reason was simple.

'If we huddle together a little, Reinhardt will easily find us.'

If they sat separately in the stands, there was a chance that Reinhardt might not find them.

But if they sat close together with friends, Reinhardt would be able to spot them more easily. In fact, Reinhardt found them with precision.

When Reinhardt won his first match with an overwhelming difference, Olivia was the only one who screamed in the midst of everyone's astonishment, yelling, "Take me! Take me with youuuu!" causing an awkward scene as everyone stared at her.

Reinhardt's next match would begin once all the D-group 36th round matches had finished.

Harriet looked at Ellen quietly.

She thought Ellen might participate in the Unrestricted Tournament, but strangely enough, she had entered the Miss Temple contest.

"Ah… It's Reinhardt's turn soon. I didn't come to watch that… Hey, when is

Reinhardt's match? Check the schedule."

"You should check it yourself, senior."

"Seniors should be obeyed!"

"…Reinhardt doesn't like people who talk like that. Oh, I guess you don't know that."

"You, you… Fine, let's drop it."

She was like an angel only in front of Reinhardt. Acting as if she could give everything to Reinhardt, but being irritable towards everyone close to him.

The increasingly twisted and distorted character of Eredian's Holy Maiden, Olivia Lanze.

Both Ellen and Harriet had one person they wanted to beat, even though they participated in different competitions: that person was her.

Could they beat her?

Contrary to such concerns, Olivia Lanze acted as if the two of them didn't matter at all. No, she deliberately ignored them to make them angry.

"Ugh, this is so boring! Bring me our Reinhardt!"

"Please, be quiet."

As Olivia began to throw a tantrum, Ellen frowned and glared at her.

"What? Do you want to go out there right now and have an event match with me? People will really love it!"

"Not there, but right here, right now."

"Should we?! Show me? Huh?"

"Don't imitate Reinhardt just because you're in a bad mood."

At that, Ellen's personality also changed whenever she met her.

Ellen and Olivia Lanze.

If the two of them were to barge into the arena, none of the matches that followed would be of any interest to the spectators.

"Both of you, please stop…”

Harriet felt nauseous just watching the two of them.

CHAPTER 290

Time had passed and all thirty-two matches of the first year students had come to a close. Now, it was time for the second round of matches, the round of sixteen, to begin. Eight matches were to take place.

Naturally, the first match of the round of sixteen would be Reinhardt's turn.

"Reinhardt! Stay strong!"

Olivia shouted, her voice filled with excitement.

The round of sixteen will be conducted in a best-of-three format. The announcer added that today's main event, which could be considered the group finals, would be conducted in a best-of-five format.

During the round of thirty-two, Reinhardt had made eye contact with his supporters, but this time, he was not looking their way.

He could at least glance at them once.

That's what Harriet thought.

“…Wait a moment."

Olivia's excited expression stiffened.

"Something's off."

Ellen noticed something as well. Both she and Olivia seemed to sense something that the other spectators could not.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

Olivia murmured, her expression turning serious.

"Reinhardt's condition… seems to be not good."

"There seems to be a problem."

Both Ellen and Olivia intuitively knew that there was an issue with Reinhardt's condition.

Meanwhile, to the right of their seats, where the Class B students were gathered, Saviolin Turner was watching Reinhardt with her arms crossed.

Just as Olivia and Ellen had felt, Saviolin Turner also knew about the problem that had occurred with Reinhardt.

Of course, she knew more accurately than the other two.

"Reinhardt is not used to Magic Body Strengthenings."

“…That's probably true."

Charlotte was somewhat aware of this as well.

"When you try to use a power you're not accustomed to, you're bound to reach your limit eventually."

"Limit?"

Reinhardt had always succeeded in drawing on newfound strength in times of crisis. However, this time was different.

Now, it was not a real battle, but a tournament where they had to face consecutive fights.

The unfamiliar Magic Body Strengthening would lead to fluctuations in his condition as he continued to use it.

"Reinhardt will be vulnerable in continuous battles."

If he used Magic Body Strengthenings, his condition would inevitably worsen with each successive fight.

Not all the royal class students who had gathered here had come to support Reinhardt.

However, most of them secretly believed in Reinhardt's victory.

Ludwig and Scarlett were highly skilled, but Reinhardt could use Magic Body Strengthenings.

Yet now, they realized that the very Magic Body Strengthening could ultimately hold Reinhardt back.

Charlotte looked at Reinhardt with a worried expression.

"Does he have to win without using Magic Body Strengthenings?"

"That might be the best way, but… it might be possible today, but what about tomorrow?"

Inadequate power exacts a price.

-We will now begin the first match of the Temple Tournament Round of 16!

With the announcer's proclamation, the first match of the Round of 16 began.

The Round of 16 concluded with my victory, two wins to none.

There were no moments of danger.

However, in the first set, attempting not to use the power enhancement led to several precarious moments.

My opponent was from the general class, but they were not someone to be dismissed based on skill. In the end, I had no choice but to rely on the power enhancement in the second set.

Being in the general class for a year without admission to the Orbis Class doesn't mean they couldn't surpass the skills of those in the Orbis Class through training.

I tried to resolve the issue with Self-Suggestion, but it didn't work as well as I had hoped.

Of course, I managed to win twice without using the power enhancement.

Upon returning to the waiting room, I was greeted by Ludwig and Scarlett.

There was a separate viewing area for the waiting room, allowing them to watch the match. It seemed that Ludwig and Scarlett had been observing my game from there.

"You did great, Reinhardt."

"Well done."

“…Thanks."

Power enhancement.

I was acutely aware that it was a double-edged sword.

Naturally.

After all, I had only used this power twice before today. I succeeded in using it a third time, but I had to pay the price for using a power I wasn't yet accustomed to.

I didn't faint, but my body felt heavy as if it had been soaked in water.

Moreover, I had to face the next match without enough time to recover my condition.

It wasn't a typical injury, so receiving healing from a priest on standby wouldn't help.

There was no issue in the Round of 16.

However, the upcoming Group A finals in the Round of 8 were best of five with three wins, and tomorrow's semi-finals would also follow the same format.

I wasn't confident in defeating the likes of Grayden Amorel, Ludwig, or Scarlett without using power enhancement.

If my worsened condition didn't improve by tomorrow or if I exhausted too much of my energy in the semi-finals.

I might not be able to win the championship.

I had been mistaken in thinking that power enhancement had become an integral part of my strength.

I sat still in the athlete's waiting room, watching the next Round of 16 match.

-Crash!

A burly fellow resembling a bear or a human tank was aggressively pushing his opponent.

Power enhancement is a force that dramatically enhances physical abilities.

-Thump!

-Set 1 goes to Richard Howlman of the Erazon class!

The burly man, who had flattened his off-balance opponent, claimed the first set.

It was clear that he would undoubtedly overpower me in terms of strength.

That scoundrel is my final opponent for today. Unfortunately, given the current situation, we're not exactly a good match.

Could I possibly defeat him without using magic enhancement?

My fingers were trembling of their own accord.

Since it was the rule for the defeated to leave the waiting room, the once-crowded space had significantly thinned out.

First-year Erazon class.

Richard Howlman.

The human-tank-like fellow I had quarreled with was now confirmed to be my opponent in the A-group quarterfinals.

"Lilka is in that class."

"Ah… really?"

Grayden Amorel seemed to know and explained it to me. Lilka Eren shared a class with that guy.

I wasn't exactly friends with Lilka, but I couldn't help feeling a bit worried.

"They say he's notorious for his cruel nature. He claims he didn't get into the Orbis Class because he failed the personality test during the entrance examination. I don't know for sure, though."

While it was possible that stories related to the Orbis Class were exaggerated, I had seen with my own eyes that his skills were no bluff, as he had advanced to the main tournament.

As much as he had skill, his personality was equally despicable.

"Just like me, then."

"Haha… I guess that's one way to put it."

Grayden Amorel chuckled. For some reason, he had transformed from a stoic character to a somewhat likable one.

Of course, if Grayden Amorel faced Richard Howlman, the outcome would be a clear victory for Grayden.

I had seen all the matches of Ludwig, Scarlett, and Grayden, so I knew.

In this place, he was undoubtedly the most outstanding, excluding all other abilities.

Assuming I didn't use magic enhancement, I wouldn't be able to defeat him. Although my Self-Suggestion had reached A-rank, I wasn't sure if I could secure a clear advantage.

If I used the power of the spirits, it might be different, but I hadn't yet figured out how to make it work properly.

-Thump!

Richard Howlman, the winner, flung open the door to the spectator seats and strode in, staring at me.

"Are you prepared, Royal class scum?"

"…"

My chances of winning had become uncertain.

It was because I knew that the magic enhancement wasn't truly my own strength.

He looked at my silent face and scoffed.

"What, cat got your tongue? Are you starting to get scared?"

I looked up at him, crossing my arms and smirking.

"Didn't you fail the Orbis Class personality test?"

"That's right. I didn't get in, but it's not because I couldn't. You understand?"

"What do you mean, personality? Judging by your face, it seems like you didn't make the cut because you look like a damn beggar, am I wrong?"

His face contorted with anger, and I chuckled.

That's the way to do it.

It's more effective to insult someone for an unsolvable problem than for a solvable one.

"Wow, you're disgustingly ugly. Can you even call that a face? Hey, get lost before my eyes rot. Go wash up with some oozing broth. No wonder I smelled something like a pig."

That is to say, I didn't just attack him personally.

"You damn mutt…!"

"Go ahead and try. If you want to be disqualified."

I leaned in, getting even closer to his face. As his eyes seemed to invert with rage, I chuckled. He raised his fist but couldn't bring himself to strike.

If he did, he'd be disqualified.

I laughed as I looked at Richard Howlman, whose fist trembled with anger.

"You're holding up pretty well for someone with a filthy temper. Maybe there's really no problem with your personality? Did you really not make it because of your ugly face?"

"You damn…!"

"Reinhardt, stop it…"

In the end, Ludwig and Scarlett intervened. Thinking an accident might occur, Grayden Amorel left the stands with a furious Richard Howlman.

We weren't the only ones in the stands.

Everyone else was staring at me as if I were insane.

Did some thug from a regular class think they could mess with me?

I, too, had a royal-grade personality.

"Reinhardt, I really don't understand why you do this."

In the end, even Ludwig, a true gentleman, scolded me.

"I'm really glad I'm in the same class as Reinhardt…"

Scarlett sighed deeply.

Everything went as expected.

Scarlett, Ludwig, and Grayden Amorel all advanced to the final round without a hitch. The first-year tournament had only one match left today.

The only variable was that my Magic Body Strengthening drained my condition.

Even if I won two matches in the best-of-five group finals, if my condition deteriorated in the last three matches and I collapsed vomiting blood, I would lose.

-Wowwwwwww!

The remaining matches featured more skilled players, so the spectators' reactions were heated.

Of course, I still didn't understand what was so entertaining about it.

From the perspective of someone who grew up watching the wealthy wearing full-body armor and flying through the sky shooting laser beams from their hands, this was an extremely dull pastime.

This world is a cultural wasteland.

A battle between superhumans would need to be quite flashy, but the first-year tournament wasn't quite there.

The unrestricted-class tournament would likely have more dazzling spectacles.

In the end, today's final duel.

I looked at Richard Howlman, standing opposite me. His eyes burned with a desire to devour me.

Why did I keep provoking him, perhaps a bit too excessively?

Honestly, part of it was simply to provoke him, but it was also to see that expression on his face.

If the opponent had a personality prone to losing their cool and getting agitated, there was no reason not to push them in that direction.

Winning without using Magic Body Strengthening would be best.

If I could create an overwhelming difference in power with Magic Body Strengthening, I wouldn't need to worry about these things, but for now, I don't want

to use it.

Thus, I need to clearly recognize the difference between my opponent and me, and enter the battle with that awareness.

My weapon is a longsword.

A longsword is a two-handed sword, but it's not impossible to use with one hand. Therefore, I can switch between using it with one hand or both as needed.

The blade length is approximately one meter.

However, with a height of nearly two meters, Richard Howlman's weapon is a two-handed sword commonly called a zweihander.

The blade length is about 1.8 meters, equal to my height.

His weapon surpasses mine in reach and weight.

Due to its excessive length, the sword is difficult to balance when thrusting, so it has a ricasso, which allows him to grip it above the guard and swing it.

In other words, it has an extension of the handle, and attached to the ricasso is a second guard called parrying hooks, designed to protect it.

It looks like a sword with an additional handle and guard.

Considering his physical prowess, he should be able to handle that large sword with one hand to some extent.

He has the advantage in terms of attack range and height.

In the duel with Lilka Eren, in the end, he had no choice but to resort to kicks due to his short stature. Reach and weight alone can determine the advantage or disadvantage in a fight.

I have to accept and go in with that understanding.

At the minimum, the opponent has the advantage.

But when have I ever only taken part in advantageous battles?

The monstrous man wielding a monstrous sword will undoubtedly be weaker than any opponent I have faced so far.

It's only the quarterfinals, after all.

I may have become stronger, but I am far from perfect, and I can never be perfect.

I am simply aware of a penalty that forces me to seal one of my most important powers and fight without it.

I will use my Magic Body Strengthening in the semifinals or finals.

Now is not the time.

-We will now begin the Gladius Temple Tournament quarterfinals! The battle between Royal class's Reinhardt and Erazone class's Richard Howlman!

-Wowwwww!

-Reinhardt! Do your best!

Olivia's shout faintly reached my ears.

On top of that.

-Reinhardt!

A voice I didn't expect to hear joined in.

Despite the battle starting, I couldn't help but turn my head in surprise.

Ellen was cupping her hands around her mouth and shouting.

-Win!

Neither Ellen nor I, nor Harriet and Liana sitting next to her, expected her to cheer like that.

It was just a single shout.

However, everyone who knows Ellen knows that it is a rare spectacle for her to act like that. That's why they're all so surprised. Olivia was also watching Ellen's unexpected shouting in astonishment from right beside her.

Ellen does something she never does, an action no one could have predicted.

Ellen shouts at me.

-If you don't win, you're in for a scolding!

More than anything, I was the most surprised.

I didn't use Self-Suggestion.

My condition hasn't improved either.

But still.

Strangely enough…

The trembling in my hands stopped.

Up until now, I've relied on Self-Suggestion for everything.

I changed because I believed in myself, and I have developed myself using that. The power I gained, which I couldn't have otherwise, all originated from that strength.

But this time, it doesn't come from there.

This time, it's not about Supernatural Powers, refinement, phenomena, or Magic Body Strengthening.

Win.

Ellen's shout silenced all the trembling.

There should be no improvement from such a thing, and there should be no recovery of the broken balance of the body caused by the instability of the magical circuit due

to a single cheer.

But why?

Why do I feel that everything is alright now?

"Raaaahhhhh!"

Why, when the human tank is charging at me with fierce momentum… do I not feel the slightest thought of losing?

CHAPTER 291

The great sword, zweihander, descended upon me.

-Clang!

I parried his sword with mine, twisting it to force it off course, and swiftly transitioned into a half-swording stance to thrust toward his throat.

If he were an amateur, his throat would already be exposed, and it would be over.

However, the opponent was ultimately a foul-tempered fellow, and while he might be excited, his skills were far from amateurish.

He pushed his sliding sword back up at an angle, hooking my blade with his zweihander's parrying hook and shoving it away.

In a situation where one was being pushed back due to the weight of the armament and struggling in a contest of strength, it was foolish to try and push the sword further in.

-Clang!

I withdrew my sword at an angle and created some distance. Richard Howlman quickly changed his stance.

-Clang! Clang! Thud!

Several more exchanges ensued.

He maintained his distance, using his long reach to keep me in check. It was fine if it worked, and even if it didn't, there was no risk.

There was no reason not to exploit an overwhelming advantage. Thus, he was merely doing his best.

The side with the longer reach always had the initiative, while the side with the

shorter reach had to bear the disadvantage of having to break through.

That's why, when using a sword, it's incredibly annoying to face opponents with polearms. Even during the preliminaries, I couldn't claim to have defeated opponents with polearms based on skill alone; I simply overpowered them physically.

In this case, the opponent's weapon wasn't a polearm, but the difference in reach was still severe.

And there was another thing.

-Clang!

His sword was significantly heavier than mine.

As a result, there was an inevitable difference in the limits of the weight carried by the tip of our swords.

It was a difficult weapon to handle, but if used well, it was no different from a blunt weapon. And that fellow had the physical capabilities and body structure to handle the zweihander.

"Why, you were talking as if you could chew me up and spit me out, but now that you're actually facing me, it's not going so well, is it?"

Richard Howlman sneered at me with a malicious grin.

To others, it must have looked like I was being pushed back, and in reality, I was.

"Spewing nonsense while dripping sweat in a sacred duel. Wipe that sweat off, you brat."

“…Heh."

Even though he was laughing, I could sense his impatience.

No matter how outstanding his physical abilities were, the weight of that weapon was significant.

He must have trained extensively, but close combat ultimately consumed an

immense amount of stamina and energy.

This was different from simple exercise.

In a fight, combat fatigue inevitably sets in.

Having the initiative meant that he had to constantly maintain his attacking stance and make use of that initiative.

All I had to do was calmly retreat while accepting the disadvantage of lacking initiative due to the difference in reach.

Let him tire out.

I'll strike when an opening presents itself.

Neither of us is Ludwig; our stamina is not infinite.

He's impatient, and I'm waiting for an opportunity.

If there's nothing I can do about the disadvantage stemming from the difference in our weapons, I have no choice but to exploit the penalty he bears.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

I calmly retreated, sometimes stepping to the side, evading his attacks while luring him in.

Become more impatient.

Just a bit more.

A little more hastiness.

I lured him in as I retreated, prompting his attack.

He held his sword in a long grip, with his right hand on the handle and his left hand on the ricasso, thrusting in a backhanded manner.

Though he held it short, the monstrous length of his two-handed sword still had a

much longer reach than my weapon. Even when held like that, it was longer.

Thrusting backhandedly generally involved striking downwards from above, rather than directly forward.

The wider the gap between the hands gripping the sword, the easier it was to maintain balance, and the greater the force.

To block his sword, I inevitably had to adopt an upward parrying stance. In essence, he was applying force like a half-swording technique, and I had to counter it by pushing upwards and outwards in the same half-swording manner.

However, his sword had a parrying hook, while mine did not.

If I were to win the power struggle, his parrying hook would block my sword, but if I were pushed back, my hand gripping the middle of my sword would be sliced by his blade.

The difference in weapons.

Some choices become impossible due to this difference, while others become available.

It was difficult to push away or deflect his backhanded thrust with the sword held long. If I were to haphazardly engage his sword, I might be the one pushed back instead.

His backhanded thrust.

The chain of thoughts and judgments began with just that one move, occurring almost simultaneously.

From one to ten.

Some of it was from the lessons I had learned, but the true realization came thanks to Ellen.

Ellen had taught me various attack and defense techniques that changed according to the numerous weapons she used.

In this situation, attempting to parry a thrust that resembled a downward strike with a half-swording technique against an opponent with that kind of weapon would be suicidal.

In an instant, my body made the decision, not my mind.

Embodied memory.

Was it a spinal reflex?

After countless practices and training, I no longer drew conclusions from my thoughts. Having clashed so many times, my body had reached a state where it could recall memories.

Of everything I possessed, this was the product of my efforts.

It was the sole thing I could attribute to my sweat and perseverance, obtained through innumerable fractures, rolls, blows, falls, and hits, even if I didn't want to remember.

This was not a cheat.

According to the general knowledge I had gained through Ellen, in a situation with such weapon differences, I should avoid, not push back, a powerful downward strike like this one.

Neither he nor I had spent our time in the temple frivolously; there was no reason to underestimate each other beyond our competitive spirits.

He probably didn't think this attack would work either.

There must be a calculation in his head that was uniquely his own. Ultimately, such battles were both physical contests and battles of wits.

Assuming that I would dodge his downward thrust, he would design a follow-up attack based on the situation that arose after he made me dodge.

In the event that I dodge to the side or move backward, he would swiftly change his stance, either thrusting or altering the direction of his sword to cut, devising a derived attack.

In the moment his sword strikes, he constructs such plans, and I design my countermeasures.

What's important is this.

Under normal circumstances, the reasonable judgment would be to dodge in this situation.

But.

I make a decision that I shouldn't.

The decision he thought I couldn't make.

With that, I scatter all of his plans.

I push back against the descending sword.

In a situation where his weight, reach, and physicality are all superior to mine, I make the worst possible move.

Under normal circumstances, it would be the worst move.

But I am not ordinary.

I put all my strength into a single sword strike.

One strike.

-Whoosh!

“!”

I am a Supernatural.

It is undeniably my power to accomplish something beyond conventional reasoning.

Having expelled his sword with a sudden burst of explosive strength, I thrust my half-sworded weapon into his exposed throat.

-Flash!

Richard Howlman, with wide-open eyes, is recalled by the Recall Artifact.

Critical hit success.

-1st Set! Reinhardt takes it!

It's my victory.

Best of five, first to three wins.

A total of three victories and zero defeats.

-Royal Class Reinhardt concludes the 1st Year Tournament Main Round A Group matches undefeated!

-Wow!

After being recalled, I stared intently at Richard Howlman, who was resummoned to the tournament arena.

That guy doesn't know I'm a Supernatural.

And since this isn't a shonen manga, I didn't bother to explain to him that I'm actually a Supernatural and the intricacies of my abilities.

So, he must have thought I employed some sort of cunning trick.

Of course, I had been using my Supernatural powers in all the previous duels. However, I hadn't used my self-suggestion, one-point concentration, or skill utilization.

In the end, a single gap in a fight can lead to defeat, so I merely withstood his attacks ordinarily and then unleashed a momentary burst of power.

All I needed to do was to pierce through a brief opening.

He didn't even know what he had fallen for. It must have felt like being bewitched by a ghost. It would have seemed as if I suddenly exhibited an abnormally strong force for a moment, even though he thought he had accurately gauged my capabilities.

"You… You used some tricks… Definitely cheating…"

Richard Howlman muttered bitterly.

I didn't bother to explain to him.

"Lack of information about your opponent is ultimately your own mistake."

Regardless of whether he claims cheating or not, there's no rule prohibiting Supernaturals from participating, so it's a futile effort.

I've already won.

Therefore, I have no intention of further provoking or taunting him.

All that remains for me is to win the Main Round A Group.

Undefeated.

I managed to achieve that while minimizing the use of my Magic Body Strengthening.

In one way or another, my duels had been rather bland, but I continued my undefeated march, having won each set without losing a single point. The cheers of the audience were fervent.

At first, it was somewhat nerve-wracking, but after experiencing it a few times, the countless gazes of the people watching me were neither enjoyable nor particularly terrifying.

Numerous people in the stands were watching me.

I watched those who wished for my victory.

Semifinals, and if victorious there, the finals.

Now, only two matches remained.

I watched the remaining matches.

Grayden Amorel, like me, won with a 3-0 set score.

Ludwig finished with a hard-fought 3-2 victory.

Scarlett, after two wins, conceded a set and concluded with a 3-1 score.

As expected, everyone advanced to the finals, despite the varying set scores.

The Royal Class, Orbis Class, and Special Classes had all made it.

After the first-year main round concluded, a brief rest would be given, and the audience would either take a break or stay in their seats.

Also, the brackets for the semifinals were decided immediately.

My eyes met Scarlett's.

"Ah… Reinhardt."

“…Well, it turned out like this."

Scarlett and I.

"Ludwig, was it? I look forward to it."

"Me too!"

Grayden Amorel and Ludwig.

The semifinal matchups were set like this.

Considering they were all formidable opponents, it didn't matter who I faced; I had the same feeling. Magic Body Strengthening was the key to this contest.

How one utilized that power, which could only be used a limited number of times, and whether they could endure the after-effects would determine the winner.

The fact that the finals were tomorrow was rather awkward.

I thought the week-long festival would be long, but in the end, those participating had to struggle with tight schedules due to numerous events.

The finals were not the end.

Regardless of victory or defeat, I had to participate in the cross-dressing contest on Wednesday.

"…"

"Reinhardt, what's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

As my expression suddenly soured, Ludwig and Scarlett examined my complexion.

"You all did a great job!"

When we left the stadium to return to the dormitory, Charlotte greeted us.

Charlotte and the entire B-Class.

And most of A-Class. Although Ellen and Harriet didn't say much, their emotions were evident in their expressions.

"I should have participated, too. I could have knocked them all down with a sizzle."

Liana whispered nonsense in my ear.

It seemed everyone but Bertus was there.

The hapless trio, Heinrich, and even Cliffman were present.

Wait, I saw Cliffman, but were they there too? Where had they been?

…It seemed they were sitting on the other side, and I hadn't noticed them.

There, on the field, stood Olivia Lanze and Redina, with Saviolin Turner beside them.

"Young one! You've truly honed your skills in combat, haven't you?"

"Can't you just say I did well? Why do you have to put it that way?"

"Well, it would be strange if you couldn't handle it, considering how much fighting you've been doing!"

Redina laughed as she grabbed my arm.

"We've all decided to go eat something delicious together! Let's all go!"

Both Class A and Class B had gathered to celebrate the success of every participant reaching the final round of the competition. In the original work, Class A and Class B were in a fierce rivalry, constantly bickering and tearing at each other, with an absolutely terrible relationship. While Class A had been the ones to unilaterally torment Class B, Class B didn't particularly like Class A either.

However, now both classes were gathered together, exchanging stories and planning to go out and enjoy this wonderful day together.

"You're participating in the Unrestricted Class Tournament, right?"

"Ah, yes."

"I heard it's been a long time since a magic major has participated. It's quite surprising."

“…I'll do my best."

"Yeah, I've heard you're incredibly impressive."

"Is that so?!"

Though Harriet didn't seem particularly close to Charlotte, she led the conversation, discussing various topics.

"Let's go, Reinhardt."

Ludwig smiled as he pulled my arm.

Everyone was taking the lead.

I suddenly became aware that I was a part of this scene.

I observed the relationships between people that had changed because of me.

It wasn't intentional, but the situation had turned out perfectly.

Everything was perfect.

Almost excessively so.

CHAPTER 292

There were twenty-two students in the first year of the Royal Class.

Excluding Bertus, there were twenty-one gathered here.

Adding Olivia Lanze, Rerdina, and Saviolin Turner, the number became twenty-three.

Of course, Olivia thought it was quite a stretch for her to be included here, so after patting my shoulder to show her support, she left.

I didn't forget to thank Olivia for coming.

Despite the terrible relationship between Ellen and me, she stood firmly by my side, cheering me on. The same went for Ellen.

Gratefulness towards Olivia was natural, aside from the headache-like feeling it brought.

"Take good care of yourself. Winning is great, but don't get hurt. That's enough for me."

"Yes."

After Olivia left, Charlotte and I led the large group of twenty-two students through the streets.

There were musicians playing on the streets, performers entertaining the crowd, and the streets were bustling with energy.

Ranian Sesor, the B-10 music prodigy, borrowed instruments from the street musicians and played even more flawlessly, causing passersby to stop and applaud.

When did we all start wandering around, enjoying various activities together? I couldn't remember.

Of course, we didn't have time to play late into the night. After gathering for a meal

and wandering around for a while, the group split into those returning to the dormitory and those staying out on the streets.

Charlotte seemed intent on having more fun, leading a few students from Class B and Saviolin Turner.

Those heading back included me, with the final match tomorrow, Ludwig, Scarlett, and Ranian Sesor, the music prodigy. The magic research club members and Harriet also joined us.

Before I knew it, Ellen was walking beside me.

I was genuinely startled when she suddenly shouted earlier, thinking my heart might drop. Now, she had returned to her usual calm demeanor.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Should I answer honestly, or should I lie and tell you not to worry?"

Ellen glared at me in response to my nonsense.

Seeing Ellen's pouting lips after a long time made me feel strangely amused.

"Honestly, I'm fine."

The issue of my condition wasn't a serious injury, but rather an unsettling feeling that could create a crucial difference in a decisive moment.

Just as Richard Howlman had never been able to beat me due to that slight edge, it was a vital issue.

"Don't get hurt. And don't push yourself too hard."

"I'll keep that in mind."

In the end, Ellen and Olivia said the same thing.

Harriet was walking a little farther away, conversing with the magic research club members.

It seemed that the magic research club was working together, putting their heads together to support Harriet's unrestricted tournament participation.

In particular, Louis Ancton seemed to be deeply contemplating.

What kind of achievement had they made? It was highly likely that the outcome would remain unknown to me.

Could Harriet win?

I thought that might be difficult.

However, just making it to the main event of the unrestricted tournament was already an incredible achievement. It was possible that she had good luck in the bracket, but luck is only possible when backed by skill.

As if sensing my gaze, Harriet, who had been walking and talking with great focus, glanced at me and tilted her head.

“…Why?"

“…No, just, do your best."

“…Isn't that what you should be hearing right now?"

True.

The unrestricted tournament still had some time left, and the finals were tomorrow. Harriet briefly laughed at my words, as if she couldn't believe it.

"I'll do well."

Harriet showed a warm smile.

It was the first time I had seen her smile like that.

"So, you should do well too."

Not everyone was cheering for me, and not everyone wished for my victory.

But there were people who did wish for it.

At first, it was just something I started for the achievement points, but somehow, it was becoming increasingly unrelated to the original goal.

Now, I wanted to win even without any particular rewards.

As soon as we returned to the dormitory, Ellen, Liana, and Cliffman went off somewhere, saying they had to prepare for the Miss and Mister Temple contest.

But Olivia didn't seem so busy. What were they so busy with?

Naturally, Harriet, who was definitely busier, went to the magic research club's mansion instead of the dormitory.

The hopeless trio and Heinrich seemed to be staying to enjoy the festival, and there were hardly any people remaining in the B-class, except for the top four contestants.

It was a festival. Of course, I had played to my heart's content, but there was still a lot of time left.

"It's kind of quiet."

I had just changed into my training clothes and stepped out when Ludwig, who was sitting in the dormitory lobby, spoke to me.

“…Did I mistakenly enter the B-class dormitory? I mean, I can still tell my right from my left, right?"

What are you doing here?

Of course, there's no distinction between A and B classes anymore, so it doesn't really matter. Ludwig rose from his seat.

"I'm feeling a bit uneasy."

"Uneasy?"

"Honestly, no matter how I think about it, Grayden seems stronger than me."

Ludwig didn't appear to be scared. However, was there a hidden anxiety in his expression?

"So, can we practice together? Scarlett said she's taking a break today."

"Hmm…"

Ludwig was a cunning guy, but I hadn't been too involved with him beyond a certain extent. I didn't want to have too much influence on the protagonist, especially if it was another character.

But it's impossible to avoid forever.

"Sure. I didn't have anything else to do anyway."

If we didn't use Magic Body Strengthening, we could get any injuries treated by the on-duty priests, so there was no reason to refuse.

-Clang! Clang! Clank!

"Haa… Haa…"

"Phew."

After taking a short deep breath, Ludwig scratched his head.

"It's just not working, no matter how much I try."

He had only used Self-Suggestion without resorting to Magic Body Strengthening.

We had sparred about ten times, and each bout had ended in my victory.

The rank of my Self-Suggestion ability was A. It was a Supernatural power that had clearly reached the higher tier.

There must be obvious limits to Self-Suggestion, as it had given rise to the superior

ability of Word Magic. Yet, in the end, Supernatural power was still Supernatural power, and my enhanced abilities were more than sufficient to face Ludwig.

The outcome was certain.

If Ludwig made it to the finals, my victory would be assured. There would be no need for me to strengthen my Magic Body Strengthening further.

"Damn it… I'm the one… who's tired…"

But although I had won, I was also the one who was exhausted.

This rascal, whose stamina had reached S-rank or higher, continued to lose during our sparring sessions but it was my stamina that was dwindling.

What was this feeling? A sense of defeat despite having won.

"Let's take a break and continue later."

"Phew… Alright."

My stamina wasn't weak, but Ludwig's was monstrously high. Thus, we practiced by sparring while controlling our pace.

Perhaps due to the festival, the dormitory was deserted, and the A-class training hall was only visited by Cliffman and Ellen in the first place.

As we had plenty of time, we crossed swords for hours, leaving both Ludwig and me drenched in sweat.

When the sun had set and our stamina had reached its limits, we decided to call it a day.

"I'll lose, right?"

Ludwig mumbled as he hung his practice sword on the rack.

It wasn't a display of weakness.

He just intuitively knew that he had no chance against Grayden Amorel.

He knew he would lose but wouldn't give up. That was the kind of person Ludwig was.

I watched Ludwig and wiped my sweat with a towel draped over a chair.

"Seems that way."

I had no intention of denying it.

Grayden Amorel's skill surpassed Ludwig's and even that of Scarlett and me. I could only face him with my Supernatural powers and Magic Body Strengthening abilities.

Of course, I would first have to win the quarterfinals against Scarlett without a hitch.

Ludwig opened the window of the training hall.

Cold winter air rushed in, but it didn't feel bad given how much we had sweated.

"Reinhardt, I have a question."

Ludwig, with his back to me as he gazed outside the window, spoke.

It was the first time I had seen such a serious side of the always bright and cheerful fellow.

"What is it?"

"You've fought battles knowing you would lose, right?"

“…Yes, I have."

"But, you've won all of them."

Ludwig stared at the darkness enveloping the festival-lit temple in the winter night.

I was the protagonist of some truly strange events. I had faced impossible battles, knowing I couldn't win, yet I had emerged victorious every time.

In a mere year, an F-ranked amateur had become the strongest contender for the first-year tournament, recognized by all.

An egg that would always shatter the rock it struck.

That was me.

"How do you think you were able to do that?"

Ludwig seemed curious about the secret behind my success.

It wouldn't be about questioning Supernatural powers, Magic Body Strengthening, or countless coincidences. Nor was it about doubting the cheats I possessed.

"You have to believe."

"Believe?"

"Yes."

I didn't have much to say, so I ended up talking about my Supernatural powers, which Ludwig already knew.

Self-Suggestion.

"Though I may lose, and losing seems inevitable, I still have to believe."

"That you can win?"

"Yes."

I also placed my practice sword on the rack, leaned against it, and crossed my arms.

"Rather than saying I'll do my best even if I lose, I should believe that I'll win by any means necessary."

"But what if you still lose in the end?"

"What does it matter?"

The outcome is not the most important.

"Saying I'll do my best even if I lose sounds like preparing an excuse for defeat. It's

like creating an escape route for oneself in advance, justifying the loss by saying I've tried my best and I'll do better next time."

After returning from Darkland, I lived with that mindset for a while.

I can't say I'm completely free of such thoughts now, but I know what's truly best.

One must believe in the possibility even in moments where it seems impossible. Only then, when even the slightest chance appears, can one grasp it.

Saying I'll do my best even if I lose is not Self-Suggestion but consolation.

My power isn't like that; it's Self-Suggestion.

It must be described in the future tense, as in "I will win," not in the past tense of "I tried my best."

Not by judging the past, but by shaping the future.

That's how I have created who I am today.

"Instead of preparing such excuses, I think it's better to simply believe that I'll win. That's all there is to it."

Of course, Ludwig is not a Supernatural. Accepting my words won't change anything for him.

"Running away… Yeah, that's what it is. I was… doing that. Just saying I tried my best wasn't enough… Right."

Ludwig closed the window and turned his head.

Though I may lose.

Though I may not be able to win against Grayden Amorel.

"See you in the finals, Reinhardt."

Ludwig said it with certainty.

CHAPTER 293

"Reinhardt? I heard he's a Supernatural?"

"That's cheating!"

"Did you just shout?"

"Ah, no. It's just… I apologize."

Richard Howlman blurted out and then bowed his head.

Richard, who had not won a single set in the top eight, was extremely angry. He had already sensed defeat when his opponent started to use Magic Body Strengthening.

However, the opponent did not use it.

Instead, he was pushed back by some strange force, causing unintentional gaps, which led to his defeat.

Lack of information about the opponent was a mistake.

Upon further investigation, it turned out that Reinhardt was a Supernatural from the beginning.

That was unfair.

Why did Richard, who had trained honestly and hard, have to lose to such an unjust and absurd thing?

Richard Howlman's eyes widened, and he gritted his teeth.

Without Supernatural powers, he could have won. He could have crushed his opponent. But no matter what excuses he made, they were useless.

Richard Howlman was now in the dormitory of the Erazon class, one of the regular classes.

There were classmates and seniors gathered.

Even though it was the temple, it was currently festival time, so various aspects had become more lenient. Therefore, they were gathered in the dormitory, indulging in a drinking game.

Compared to the Royal class, it was somewhat lacking, but it was not too cramped a space as it was ultimately the temple.

The students seemed to be the type who did not earnestly participate in temple life.

A senior who seemed to be the leader of the gathering had poured a full glass of alcohol for Richard Howlman, who had almost become the hero of the day but ended up being the loser because of the variable called Reinhardt.

-Glug, glug, glug

"Anyway, you have to keep your promise, right?"

"Ah, the… the promise?"

"You said if you didn't make it to the semifinals, you would participate in the cross-dressing contest, right?"

The reason the cross-dressing contest always had a strange popularity was because people knew each other and used it as a penalty game. They participated to have a duel-like match among themselves, and to ridicule the losers.

The ones being laughed at, and those who laughed.

That's why the participants of the cross-dressing contest usually ended up joining with such intentions.

Not long ago, Richard Howlman had accepted the bet. He was overflowing with confidence.

Of course, he had not anticipated the situation turning out like this.

Excessive confidence often leads to trouble.

Richard Howlman's face turned pale.

"Ah, no! Why should I do that!"

"I said if you made it to the semifinals, I would participate in the cross-dressing contest, right? You said the opposite, right? Hey, is there anyone here who didn't hear that? Raise your hand if you didn't."

The ultimate test of holding back laughter had begun.

No matter how much of a bully Richard Howlman was, he didn't have the guts to mess with his seniors, but he was enough of a bully to punch anyone who dared to laugh openly here.

"Ah, I'll do whatever you want me to, but please, not that…"

"Join the cross-dressing contest. That's all I ask of you, punk."

The senior student downed his drink in one gulp and exhaled. While Richard was at a loss for what to do, one of the first-year students cautiously mumbled.

"But, hasn't the registration for that already ended?"

"!"

Richard's expression brightened for a moment.

"Do you think I wouldn't know that? Hey, they even accept applications an hour before the contest starts."

As if there was never a way out to begin with, the senior student snickered, and the other seniors all looked amused.

"If you had won, I would've been in big trouble! Did you really think I would've gone through with it? You know?"

From the start.

The seniors had already known that it was impossible for someone from a regular class to advance to the semifinals in a tournament where special classes were bound

to participate.

'Reinhardt, you damned swindler!'

Richard Howlman was filled with hatred for Reinhardt, but he had no idea that they would meet again.

The day after the festival began.

Tuesday.

The day the inter-grade tournament finals took place, starting with the first-year competition.

There were more spectators today than yesterday, as the main event was today. Consequently, the stands were overflowing.

To avoid being overwhelmed, the other students left me alone today. But they would all be sitting somewhere in the stands. Not only me but also Scarlett and Ludwig had advanced, so all of the first-year Royal Class students should be in the stands like yesterday.

In the end, both the Royal Class and the Orbis Class were products of elitism. The fact that not a single general class student made it to the Champions Tournament meant that elitism was right.

I wasn't quite sure about that.

In the finals, I was likely to face Grayden Amorel. Ludwig seemed to have made some kind of resolution, but determination does not always translate to power, except in special cases like mine.

If I used Magic Body Strengthening against Scarlett, I would have to use it against Grayden Amorel in the finals that followed.

For someone like me, who is vulnerable in consecutive battles, that would be the worst-case scenario. If I were to pass out, I would be disqualified.

But I couldn't afford to overexert myself either. The tournament was ultimately a means to earn achievement points and become stronger.

If I were to suffer irreparable injuries while trying to earn achievement points, that would be a ridiculous outcome.

I was not in a favorable situation. I held a powerful double-edged sword, but if I used it incorrectly, not only would I lose the championship, but I would also be injured.

In this situation, it was time for the first match of the first-year tournament semi-finals.

The semi-final match between first-year Royal Class students Reinhardt and Scarlett is about to begin!

Wowwwww!

With a roar of cheers, I found myself standing opposite a girl with fiery red hair and eyes.

Her weapon was a longsword, similar in style to mine. However, her sword was slightly shorter and lighter than mine. But the reach difference was not very significant.

Although I hadn't practiced with Scarlett very often, we had trained together quite a bit during our shared fencing lessons this semester.

Scarlett was fast and agile, employing a swordsmanship based on excellent reflexes. She avoided power struggles, instead deflecting her opponent's blade with her exceptional skill or changing the course of her sword in an instant through subtle wrist movements to pierce her opponent's weak points.

With a solid foundation, she predicted her opponent's moves and attacked with well-timed counters.

Fundamentals.

That was something I sorely lacked.

My current skill level wasn't bad, as Ellen had taught me the essentials in a concise

manner, but I hadn't built my abilities from the ground up, slowly and steadily.

In a way, I was a student who had only learned how to solve problems. I learned the answers rather than the underlying theories.

On the other hand, Scarlett, having perfectly understood the theories, could comprehend all the problems derived from those theories.

The issue stemmed from the difference in the absolute time invested in swordsmanship. Therefore, I shouldn't have been standing in this position.

If it hadn't been for Ellen, my Supernatural abilities, or my Magic Body Strengthening, I wouldn't have been able to be in this place.

But in the end, I was standing here, and I had to face Scarlett, who held an overwhelming advantage over me in terms of actual skills.

Scarlett, one of the main heroines in the original story and a victim of ostracism due to her ominous reputation, had lost much of her earlier lack of confidence.

In the original story, it was Ludwig who guided Scarlett, while in the present, it was Charlotte.

The red-haired girl looked at me.

"Reinhardt."

“…Huh?"

Before launching her attack, Scarlett spoke first.

The audience couldn't hear our conversation.

"You're my idol."

“…What?"

I couldn't help but be surprised by her unexpected words.

But it wasn't incomprehensible.

Both Scarlett and I shared the background of coming from humble beginnings.

"I was afraid of being kicked out of the Temple, but you always seemed so confident, as if that didn't bother you at all."

Scarlett had also been present during my duel with the third-year, Meiatun.

At that time, she and I had no connections or relationship whatsoever.

Moreover, that duel took place in the A-class dormitory. Even when she was still being bullied, Scarlett had watched my duel until the end, despite Erhi's hint.

After that, there were no significant connections between Scarlett and me, but I was aware that she harbored some sort of goodwill towards me.

When I was injured, she would come to visit and briefly chat about various things.

It was a different feeling than her liking me. We would occasionally encounter each other in different places and exchange trivial stories.

I had an intuition that Scarlett placed some sort of meaning on me.

That meaning, it seems, was the title of "idol."

"I watched you," she said. "I am weak, not because my origins are weak, but simply because I am weak."

"It's possible to live that way, to be allowed to live that way, to not be driven away even when living that way, and even being driven away isn't important."

"Not everyone will like you. But not everyone will hate you either."

"If one leads a life of self-confidence, they can gain something, and even if they incur the hatred of many, it's acceptable to live while doing things worth being hated for. After all, not everyone will hate you, and someone will like you."

"Just as it is impossible to make everyone like me, it's also impossible to make everyone hate me. I realized this by looking at you."

"After seeing you, I've tried to change. I can't change completely, but I'm trying to

change little by little. Because you can do it, I thought I could too, that I had to."

Scarlett thought it was Charlotte who changed her.

But it wasn't.

Though Scarlett and I had nothing in common, she realized that it was acceptable to live like me.

So, she was in the process of changing. Scarlett, who had once gone to Miss Temple, was now participating in the first-year tournament.

In the end, both were trying to prove themselves in some way.

Scarlett sought to prove something.

"I apologize. This wasn't the place for a conversation. But I really wanted to tell you."

It occurred to me that the reason Scarlett had entered the tournament was to face me in this very arena.

"It's an honor to be your opponent in this place."

Unbeknownst to me, I had become Scarlett's idol.

Scarlett pointed her sword at me.

Her eyes, once gentle, now darkened, and her expression hardened.

"I'll do my best."

As the inaudible prologue dragged on, the murmuring audience fell silent again as Scarlett took a step forward.

Her determination to do her best was different from before. Different from what I had seen during practice matches.

This was the main stadium.

A place where one could attack with the intent to kill their opponent.

Soon, it would be a place where one could unleash everything they had to overpower their opponent.

"That would be a sign of respect towards you."

Scarlett, the crimson girl, charged at me.

As she rushed towards me, I felt her red eyes seemingly carving a trajectory through the air.

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

With an immense pressure on my wrist, I felt an intense sense of dissonance.

My Self-Suggestion wasn't working.

"Your Supernatural abilities are useless against me."

Scarlett was not a Supernatural.

However, it couldn't be said that she wasn't one either.

Her talent was undoubtedly related to Supernatural abilities.

The crimson swordsman, Scarlett.

Her talent was immunity.

In the original work, her title was Spellbreaker.

Magic and Supernatural powers alike were rendered useless against her.

Scarlett's nickname as a witch was, from the very beginning, an absurdity.

Scarlett was essentially immune to all kinds of mental and offensive magic, capable of withstanding them with her bare body.

Even Supernatural powers were completely nullified.

Calling Scarlett a witch, with her extreme resistance to magic, was nonsense from the start.

Of course, her body was not completely impervious to magic. If it were, she would be able to neutralize the barrier magic of this stadium. She possessed a controllable magic resistance, which, when pushed to the limit, became immunity.

Magic resistance indeed existed and could be trained.

However, in this world, there were only two people with Supernatural resistance.

One was Ellen Artorius, who possessed Supernatural resistance, and the other was Scarlett, whose resistance was overwhelmingly greater.

Hence, Scarlett's ability did not grow. There was no room for growth in immunity-level magic resistance and Supernatural resistance.

Despite that, she had definitely grown.

I kept a stern expression while maintaining distance from Scarlett.

Self-Suggestion was a power that influenced not others but myself.

The fact that Self-Suggestion, which strengthens me rather than attacking Scarlett, wasn't working meant that Scarlett's Supernatural resistance was affecting the surroundings.

No matter how high the magic resistance, it could only resist magic used on oneself.

A mage could not prevent magic cast on the bare ground.

Scarlett was now able to exert influence on Supernatural powers happening around her. Whether it applied to magic as well was uncertain, but it definitely blocked the activation of my Self-Suggestion.

Scarlett's ability had evolved beyond the original work.

Perhaps the reason was me.

Though I could not determine how I had influenced her, Scarlett had undoubtedly changed.

She was not practicing with me as usual but was trying to beat me using her abilities.

So this was what she meant by giving her best.

Had she refrained from using this power during practice with me out of respect?

-Clang! Clang! Clank!

My Supernatural powers were sealed.

"Without the assistance of Supernatural powers, I can't use my Magic Body Strengthening either."

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

Soon, my Magic Body Strengthening, which could only be used with the support of Self-Suggestion, was also blocked.

It was neither Grayden Amorel nor Ludwig.

Scarlett was my true nemesis.

In this place, Scarlett's ability was useless to anyone else.

Scarlett's ability was only effective against me.

Scarlett might lose to Grayden Amorel, and I might beat Grayden Amorel, but…

Against me, Scarlett held an overwhelming advantage.

-Clang! Clang! Clank!

The only reason I could barely deflect Scarlett's relentless sword attacks as I retreated was because my body remembered the fundamentals I had accumulated thus far, as well as the errors I had made along the way, which could be called an

"answer sheet of mistakes."

I must defeat Scarlett with pure skill alone.

But is that even possible?

While the quality of the time we spent honing our skills may differ, Scarlett's experience far surpasses mine quantitatively.

Self-Suggestion had become a part of me without my realizing it. Now that it was gone in this battle situation, I felt as though I had lost an arm and a leg.

I hadn't noticed when it was as natural as my own body, but now that it was blocked, I felt an intense sense of powerlessness and emptiness.

Self-Suggestion accounted for the majority of my strength.

Without Supernatural powers, was I truly this helpless?

-Clang!

Scarlett struck my sword upwards and twisted it, directing the blade towards my neck.

"Ugh!"

-Poof!

Counter-summon.

-Royal-class Scarlett takes the first set!

I had lost the first set.

CHAPTER 294

"Wow!"

There were cheers from the audience, but among those who had been watching the tournament since yesterday, some were perplexed.

"What! Why did Reinhardt lose?"

Olivia Lanze seemed unable to understand and blurted out loudly.

Most of the Royal Class shared the same reaction. Even the B-Class was no exception.

Reinhardt, who had been on an undefeated march, repeatedly backed off while struggling against Scarlett, eventually losing the first set after being pushed back.

He couldn't use his Magic Body Strengthening, and he was simply forced to retreat helplessly. Of course, Scarlett's swordsmanship was dazzling, swift, and precise at finding openings.

But Reinhardt was unusually powerless.

Everyone present knew that something was off with the situation, but they didn't know exactly what was wrong.

"He can't use his Supernatural abilities."

Everyone except Ellen.

"What?"

"He can't use his Supernatural abilities."

If there was someone who knew, it was Ellen.

Having crossed swords with Reinhardt to the point of exhaustion, Ellen knew everything about his swordsmanship. The times when he used Supernatural

abilities, when he didn't, and even when he used temporary enhancements while employing Supernatural abilities – Ellen had a detailed grasp of it all.

So she could tell that Reinhardt, for some reason, wasn't able to use his power of Self-Suggestion.

"Why can't he?"

"I don't know."

It was Harriet who responded to Ellen's words.

"Well… From what I know, her ability is immunity. Could that be related?"

Ellen didn't care much about B-Class affairs, but Harriet was aware of them because of her involvement in the magic research club. Immunity – a very unique, yet potentially very powerful talent, depending on the situation.

At the mention that it might be in effect, Ellen nodded.

"So, Reinhardt could be prevented from using his Supernatural abilities…?"

"What's that? Reinhardt's Supernatural abilities are his specialty! If he can't use them, that's cheating!"

Olivia snapped, and everyone else refrained from discussing whether Supernatural abilities were already unfair or not.

They knew by now that the senior who was extremely biased towards Reinhardt would defend him no matter what, attaching some reason to justify it.

It was best to just let her rant and leave her be, as arguing would only be exhausting.

The conclusion was clear.

The bizarre talent named Immunity.

It was having an absolute influence on Reinhardt.

Upon hearing this, Saviolin Turner watched Reinhardt, who was summoned back to

the arena for the second set.

Charlotte observed Scarlett and Reinhardt.

Scarlett, Reinhardt.

Both were precious to her, albeit in different ways.

Their hearts inclined towards one or the other, feeling sorry for the side not favored.

But this time, the opponent was not so innocent.

"What do you think will happen?"

At Charlotte's question, Saviolin Turner shook his head.

"Reinhardt is in a difficult situation."

Although Saviolin Turner didn't know much about Reinhardt's Supernatural abilities, it was clear who would win or lose if he couldn't use his power enhancement.

'If he could summon Tiamata, it might be different.'

However, that was something he couldn't easily reveal.

Saviolin Turner predicted Reinhardt's defeat.

If he had faced Scarlett in the finals, he might have achieved the runner-up or even won the championship if Scarlett had been eliminated in another bracket of the semi-finals.

In the end, Reinhardt was just unlucky with his matchups.

He had no choice but to concede the next set as well, just like the first one.

"The current set score is 2:0! If Scarlett takes one more set, her place in the finals will be confirmed!"

The announcer's voice rang sharply in everyone's ears.

The screen alternated between a composed Scarlett and my tense expression. Scarlett had promised to give her best, and she was doing just that.

I had done my best in our practice duels, using my full strength.

Scarlett had faced me without using her own power up until now.

In order to show her respect or admiration for me, she was giving her all in this match.

I wanted to ask her to go easy on me, but I didn't say it out loud. I had my abilities, and Scarlett had hers.

We were just using them against each other.

Scarlett neither laughed at my miserable defeat nor worried about me.

You said I'm your idol?

How can I be your idol when I become so weak in front of you?

Of course, I knew she wasn't talking about my skills, but in front of Scarlett's emotionless expression, I couldn't find a way to break through.

I had been using Supernatural abilities as a tool to overcome the glaring skill gap between us.

Now that those tools were unavailable, I had no chance of overpowering Scarlett.

I hadn't anticipated being stopped by Scarlett.

I never considered the possibility that her talent could block my Supernatural abilities. I thought it was impossible because it was impossible in the original story.

For example, in the original story, when Liana's lightning struck Scarlett, it wouldn't harm her.

Now, Liana wouldn't even be able to use her lightning in front of Scarlett.

I had to admit it.

I was arrogant.

I was thinking about the finals after Scarlett, not about Scarlett herself.

However, reality demanded that I struggle here, conceding two sets and now accepting defeat.

There was no way to win.

In the end, Supernatural powers were the majority of my strength. I had a bad matchup against Scarlett.

The only consolation was that there was only one person in the world with such a level of immunity ability, and that was Scarlett.

Should I accept defeat as the price of my arrogance? While pondering, a voice spoke up.

"Have you given up?"

The start of the third set had already been announced, but Scarlett did not approach, instead asking a question.

"…"

"Is this all there is to it? Relying solely on the chance awakening of your Supernatural powers? Without them, are you just a powerless, pathetic person incapable of Magic Body Strengthening or doing anything else?"

Scarlett calmly uttered those words. Were they meant to criticize me?

Did they imply that I was pathetic, that my credibility had vanished, and that I was nothing more than a dog running away with its tail between its legs?

It didn't quite sound like that.

In a way, I was a student who had only learned how to solve problems. I learned the answers rather than the underlying theories.

On the other hand, Scarlett, having perfectly understood the theories, could comprehend all the problems derived from those theories.

The issue stemmed from the difference in the absolute time invested in swordsmanship. Therefore, I shouldn't have been standing in this position.

If it hadn't been for Ellen, my Supernatural abilities, or my Magic Body Strengthening, I wouldn't have been able to be in this place.

But in the end, I was standing here, and I had to face Scarlett, who held an overwhelming advantage over me in terms of actual skills.

Scarlett, one of the main heroines in the original story and a victim of ostracism due to her ominous reputation, had lost much of her earlier lack of confidence.

In the original story, it was Ludwig who guided Scarlett, while in the present, it was Charlotte.

The red-haired girl looked at me.

"Reinhardt."

“…Huh?"

Before launching her attack, Scarlett spoke first.

The audience couldn't hear our conversation.

"You're my idol."

“…What?"

I couldn't help but be surprised by her unexpected words.

But it wasn't incomprehensible.

Both Scarlett and I shared the background of coming from humble beginnings.

"I was afraid of being kicked out of the Temple, but you always seemed so confident, as if that didn't bother you at all."

Scarlett had also been present during my duel with the third-year, Meiatun.

At that time, she and I had no connections or relationship whatsoever.

Moreover, that duel took place in the A-class dormitory. Even when she was still being bullied, Scarlett had watched my duel until the end, despite Erhi's hint.

After that, there were no significant connections between Scarlett and me, but I was aware that she harbored some sort of goodwill towards me.

When I was injured, she would come to visit and briefly chat about various things.

It was a different feeling than her liking me. We would occasionally encounter each other in different places and exchange trivial stories.

I had an intuition that Scarlett placed some sort of meaning on me.

That meaning, it seems, was the title of "idol."

"I watched you," she said. "I am weak, not because my origins are weak, but simply because I am weak."

"It's possible to live that way, to be allowed to live that way, to not be driven away even when living that way, and even being driven away isn't important."

"Not everyone will like you. But not everyone will hate you either."

"If one leads a life of self-confidence, they can gain something, and even if they incur the hatred of many, it's acceptable to live while doing things worth being hated for. After all, not everyone will hate you, and someone will like you."

"Just as it is impossible to make everyone like me, it's also impossible to make everyone hate me. I realized this by looking at you."

"After seeing you, I've tried to change. I can't change completely, but I'm trying to change little by little. Because you can do it, I thought I could too, that I had to."

Scarlett thought it was Charlotte who changed her.

But it wasn't.

Though Scarlett and I had nothing in common, she realized that it was acceptable to live like me.

So, she was in the process of changing. Scarlett, who had once gone to Miss Temple, was now participating in the first-year tournament.

In the end, both were trying to prove themselves in some way.

Scarlett sought to prove something.

"I apologize. This wasn't the place for a conversation. But I really wanted to tell you."

It occurred to me that the reason Scarlett had entered the tournament was to face me in this very arena.

"It's an honor to be your opponent in this place."

Unbeknownst to me, I had become Scarlett's idol.

Scarlett pointed her sword at me.

Her eyes, once gentle, now darkened, and her expression hardened.

"I'll do my best."

As the inaudible prologue dragged on, the murmuring audience fell silent again as Scarlett took a step forward.

Her determination to do her best was different from before. Different from what I had seen during practice matches.

This was the main stadium.

A place where one could attack with the intent to kill their opponent.

Soon, it would be a place where one could unleash everything they had to overpower their opponent.

"That would be a sign of respect towards you."

Scarlett, the crimson girl, charged at me.

As she rushed towards me, I felt her red eyes seemingly carving a trajectory through the air.

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

With an immense pressure on my wrist, I felt an intense sense of dissonance.

My Self-Suggestion wasn't working.

"Your Supernatural abilities are useless against me."

Scarlett was not a Supernatural.

However, it couldn't be said that she wasn't one either.

Her talent was undoubtedly related to Supernatural abilities.

The crimson swordsman, Scarlett.

Her talent was immunity.

In the original work, her title was Spellbreaker.

Magic and Supernatural powers alike were rendered useless against her.

Scarlett's nickname as a witch was, from the very beginning, an absurdity.

Scarlett was essentially immune to all kinds of mental and offensive magic, capable of withstanding them with her bare body.

Even Supernatural powers were completely nullified.

Calling Scarlett a witch, with her extreme resistance to magic, was nonsense from the start.

Of course, her body was not completely impervious to magic. If it were, she would be able to neutralize the barrier magic of this stadium. She possessed a controllable magic resistance, which, when pushed to the limit, became immunity.

Magic resistance indeed existed and could be trained.

However, in this world, there were only two people with Supernatural resistance.

One was Ellen Artorius, who possessed Supernatural resistance, and the other was Scarlett, whose resistance was overwhelmingly greater.

Hence, Scarlett's ability did not grow. There was no room for growth in immunity-level magic resistance and Supernatural resistance.

Despite that, she had definitely grown.

I kept a stern expression while maintaining distance from Scarlett.

Self-Suggestion was a power that influenced not others but myself.

The fact that Self-Suggestion, which strengthens me rather than attacking Scarlett, wasn't working meant that Scarlett's Supernatural resistance was affecting the surroundings.

No matter how high the magic resistance, it could only resist magic used on oneself.

A mage could not prevent magic cast on the bare ground.

Scarlett was now able to exert influence on Supernatural powers happening around her. Whether it applied to magic as well was uncertain, but it definitely blocked the activation of my Self-Suggestion.

Scarlett's ability had evolved beyond the original work.

Perhaps the reason was me.

Though I could not determine how I had influenced her, Scarlett had undoubtedly changed.

She was not practicing with me as usual but was trying to beat me using her abilities.

So this was what she meant by giving her best.

Had she refrained from using this power during practice with me out of respect?

-Clang! Clang! Clank!

My Supernatural powers were sealed.

"Without the assistance of Supernatural powers, I can't use my Magic Body Strengthening either."

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

Soon, my Magic Body Strengthening, which could only be used with the support of Self-Suggestion, was also blocked.

It was neither Grayden Amorel nor Ludwig.

Scarlett was my true nemesis.

In this place, Scarlett's ability was useless to anyone else.

Scarlett's ability was only effective against me.

Scarlett might lose to Grayden Amorel, and I might beat Grayden Amorel, but…

Against me, Scarlett held an overwhelming advantage.

-Clang! Clang! Clank!

The only reason I could barely deflect Scarlett's relentless sword attacks as I retreated was because my body remembered the fundamentals I had accumulated thus far, as well as the errors I had made along the way, which could be called an "answer sheet of mistakes."

I must defeat Scarlett with pure skill alone.

But is that even possible?

While the quality of the time we spent honing our skills may differ, Scarlett's experience far surpasses mine quantitatively.

Self-Suggestion had become a part of me without my realizing it. Now that it was gone in this battle situation, I felt as though I had lost an arm and a leg.

I hadn't noticed when it was as natural as my own body, but now that it was blocked, I felt an intense sense of powerlessness and emptiness.

Self-Suggestion accounted for the majority of my strength.

Without Supernatural powers, was I truly this helpless?

-Clang!

Scarlett struck my sword upwards and twisted it, directing the blade towards my neck.

"Ugh!"

-Poof!

Counter-summon.

-Royal-class Scarlett takes the first set!

I had lost the first set.

CHAPTER 295

The moment Reinhardt activated his Magic Body Strengthening, the outcome of the match was determined even before their swords clashed.

As Reinhardt's body was enveloped in the blue flames of magical power, Scarlett lost her grip on her sword in the blink of an eye.

Clang!

Reinhardt's blade, which had charged in an instant, knocked Scarlett's sword away.

Most martial arts techniques are designed to face opponents of the same caliber. Therefore, when a battle occurs between those who have reached a superhuman level and those who have not, it is not a matter of skill but rather of sheer power that prevents a fair fight.

Loss of weapon.

Soon, combat incapacity.

The third set goes to Reinhardt!

The announcer's declaration marked the end of the third set.

"What on earth is happening?"

Olivia seemed baffled. She was unaware that Reinhardt needed the support of Self-Suggestion to utilize Magic Body Strengthening. It seemed as if he had deliberately refrained from using it until now.

Only Ellen and Scarlett knew this.

In the audience, Ellen alone could accurately grasp the growth Reinhardt had achieved in such a short time.

Unconsciously, Ellen clenched her fist.

'Reinhardt… '

Reinhardt had taken the next step. No one else could know, but Ellen understood all too well just how significant that progress was.

Overwhelmed with happiness, Ellen struggled to hold back the urge to rush over to Reinhardt immediately.

Putting aside Ellen's excitement and the audience's astonishment, the competition continued.

The score was 2:1.

Even though Reinhardt had succeeded in using Magic Body Strengthening without the assistance of his Supernatural powers, it was still a double-edged sword.

For the next two sets, he would have to defeat Scarlett using only his Magic Body Strengthening since he couldn't use his Supernatural powers.

However, would that leave him able to compete properly in the remaining final matches?

Although he had overcome the crisis, his path to victory remained uncertain.

Now, let's begin the fourth set…

But as Scarlett and Reinhardt faced each other, Scarlett suddenly raised her hand.

“Yes, what is the matter? Ah.”

The announcer's flustered voice echoed throughout the stadium.

“First-year Royal Class student, Scarlett, has declared her forfeit.”

Forfeit.

Both the audience and her opponent, Reinhardt, were utterly taken aback by the sudden announcement.

In the waiting room,

'Reinhardt has to win this. I can't afford to hold back any longer.'

Scarlett left those words before forfeiting.

She seemed content.

Scarlett had wanted to see me not giving up. She wanted to see my reaction when my most powerful strength and means, my Supernatural powers, were neutralized.

Scarlett had hoped that I would overcome it somehow. She had always shown me something, never giving up, and wished for the same this time.

I, somehow, repaid her for that insistent encouragement.

Scarlett's initial goal had been just that.

The moment I succeeded in Magic Body Strengthening without the aid of my supernatural abilities and overpowered Scarlett, she stopped testing me any further.

Had the set continued, the outcome would have been uncertain.

It was a fleeting moment.

Though the Magic Body Strengthening was only activated for a brief instant, I used it without the support of my supernatural abilities.

My fingertips tingled, and a strange pain as if my muscles were being torn apart permeated my entire body.

Even with the support of Self-Suggestion, this power could not be used for an extended period, so it was inevitable that my body would experience a more severe overload without that assistance.

Scarlett could have beaten me. But in the end, she gave up after seeing the result she wanted.

In any case.

Unbeknownst to her, Scarlett had participated in the tournament to push me one step further.

It was possible to give it their all and collide with full force in this stadium, something that couldn't be done during practice duels.

The audience buzzed, but I returned to the waiting room, and Scarlett left with a firm insistence that I must win.

It was an uncomfortable yet oddly responsible gaze, as if they were forcing expectations upon me. If I had been an ordinary person or the usual Reinhardt, I would have told them not to spout nonsense.

However, I owed Scarlett in many ways, and so I couldn't say anything.

Ludwig and Grayden Amorel left to prepare for their next match.

Thus, I was the only one left in the first-year waiting room, and I occupied the audience seats alone.

No matter who came next, I could use Self-Suggestion. Scarlett, who had been my most formidable and unexpected opponent, gave up after seeing the transformation she had hoped for in me.

Probably the only person in the stands who noticed my change was Ellen.

She had been nagging me for so long to try Magic Body Strengthening, and I had been whining that I couldn't do it for what seemed like ages.

But this time, I succeeded in Magic Body Strengthening without the support of my supernatural abilities.

…Will she praise me?

What is this feeling?

It's as if I'm a child who has done something good and desperately wants praise from their teacher.

Well, Ellen is technically my teacher, so it's not that different, is it?

Regardless, in the empty waiting room,

I sat down to watch the semi-final match that would determine my final opponent while continuously applying Self-Suggestion to ensure my condition fully recovered.

How much time had passed?

-Now, the second match of the first-year tournament semi-finals will begin soon!

Ludwig and Grayden Amorel stepped onto the field.

In the original work, Ludwig couldn't even win a single set against Grayden Amorel.

Ellen doesn't give a single set to Grayden Amorel either.

However, Ludwig is even stronger now than he was in the original work.

Nevertheless, he cannot win. If one were to rank them, at this point in time, he would be after Ellen and me. If he were to awaken Magic Body Strengthening, he would immediately rise above me. Scarlett's case is a bit special, so we'll consider her an exception.

Will alone cannot become strength.

The moment my Self-Suggestion was nullified, I felt a sense of unease as the power I desired failed to manifest within my body. I had grown so accustomed to my own Supernatural abilities that I was once again reminded of how absurd it was to draw power through an unwavering belief.

However, Ludwig resolved not to speak of defeat anymore.

The screen displayed Ludwig's face—his ever-smiling expression, full of warmth and amiability. But now, his face was cold and hardened, an expression I had never seen before.

Grayden Amorel. A first-year student in Orbis Class A-1, his skills were second to none, even when compared to those in the Royal Class. This made him a strong contender for future leadership in the Orbis Class.

"You can do it. You can defeat the Royal Class. Just keep doing what you're doing. Just like now. No, even more—work harder."

He had heard these words countless times, pushing him to complete tasks to perfection better than anyone else.

Grayden Amorel. He had thought it was his responsibility to bear the burden of his imposed growth, but upon realizing it was a hellish existence, he broke free.

Grayden Amorel found laughter and leisure. He realized that there was no need to live a life dictated by others, so he became kinder and more compassionate. No longer feeling as if someone was constantly chasing him, he found solace.

But that didn't mean he had grown lazy. In fact, he felt his skills had improved since he was able to focus on the training he truly desired.

The satisfaction from voluntary training.

Grayden Amorel's personality had changed, but his skills hadn't deteriorated. On the contrary, it was fair to say they had advanced even further.

The once joyless boy had rediscovered his laughter.

However, his opponent—Royal Class B-11, Ludwig—had a kind, amiable, and friendly demeanor. But now, there was no trace of a smile on his face. It was as if he had steeled himself, determined to face a wall behind him where everything would end once touched.

Their roles reversed, both Grayden Amorel and Ludwig faced each other with swords drawn.

Grayden Amorel spoke to Ludwig, "It seems like you've made up your mind."

"…"

After a brief silence, Ludwig, still with a hardened expression, responded to Grayden Amorel, "I'm the lowest-ranked in the Royal Class. My talent might be enough to get me in, but in that position, I'm considered the least talented."

"What is your talent?"

"Physical strength."

Usually, Ludwig would laugh and scratch his head in a silly manner, but now, his face remained stern as he spoke calmly.

"But there was a friend in Class A with infinite potential, someone who entered without a single talent. There was a lot of talk in Class B too, saying that Class B-11 should be his. Of course, I didn't think so myself."

"But the important thing is, that friend truly had nothing. Not even the small advantage of physical strength like mine."

"However, that friend may have been weak, but he was not fragile. I cannot say it was a good thing, but he never backed down from all the hardships he faced. He fell, and no matter how many times he fell, he got back up again. He could have given up by then. It would have been right to give up. But even in those moments, he always stood back up."

Grayden Amorel seemed to know whose story Ludwig was telling.

"I am the opposite."

"Let's work hard. At anything. If we work hard, even if we fall behind for now, I believed we would be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our incredibly talented classmates. I believed in that."

"I lived with the mindset of a loser."

Always hoping for the future.

“I've been thinking too objectively about my present self. I'm not there yet. I'm still lacking compared to them. So, let's work hard. Even if I fall behind now, someday I'll be able to stand alongside them.”

It can't be helped now.

"But that friend always collided, knowing that he couldn't. He crashed, fell, got hurt, and believed he could win, even though he couldn't. He spent this past year making reckless and desperate attempts."

"Right now, I'm much weaker than that friend."

"Surely, I must have originally been stronger than him. But while I justified many other things with the thought that I was working hard, that friend surpassed me by a great distance and went far away."

"Hidden behind my excuses, while I thought working hard now was enough, that friend challenged the impossible and collided with it. It was an impossible task, but he believed it could be done."

"Yes, I admire Reinhardt."

"Catching up to this distance that has already been closed."

"I think that's what I have to do from now on."

"It won't be possible, but I have to believe that I can make it possible. That's what I decided. Reinhardt said that's what I have to believe, at least."

"I won't hide behind the excuse of working hard anymore. Just thinking like that, I will remain the same."

Ludwig, holding his sword, looks at Grayden Amorel.

Gone is the last-place Ludwig of B-Class, who had accepted reality and resigned himself under the names of effort and perseverance.

He changes.

Now, he does not console himself with the words "I'll work hard."

Not working hard, but working well.

Not doing his best, but aiming for victory.

"So."

No longer scratching the back of his head and telling himself that things will be better later after every failed result.

He abandons that now.

Willpower cannot become strength.

But there is one person in this world who knows the truth.

Willpower may not be strength, but Ludwig is the protagonist of this world.

The core of causality.

A protagonist can turn their will into power.

Such a protagonist.

Ludwig declares.

"I."

"Will."

"Defeat you."

The world is, as always, on his side.

What the hell is that guy?

I couldn't help but doubt my eyes at the results of the quarterfinals.

It was a complete victory for Ludwig, 3-0.

They seemed to be having some sort of conversation, but as soon as the duel began, the situation unfolded just as I had expected.

Ludwig's sword, with overwhelming power, drove Grayden Amorel back.

He didn't even use Magic Body Strengthening.

Nor did he use any supernatural abilities.

Ludwig countered all of Grayden Amorel's attacks with just his physical strength and

struck back.

A crushing difference in ability.

Ludwig accomplished what should only be possible with Magic Body Strengthening with his bare hands.

The audience too stared blankly at Ludwig, who had utterly defeated Grayden Amorel with monstrous strength.

-Wowww!

While those who didn't understand the situation were excited by the overwhelming and incredible fight itself, I was flabbergasted.

That speed and reaction aren't possible without Magic Body Strengthening.

I couldn't tell what he had done, but Ludwig had changed.

If he's this strong without Magic Body Strengthening, it's a given he'd be even more insane with it.

I could somewhat tell that my words from yesterday had caused some sort of ripple in Ludwig.

Willpower can't become strength. Except for me, who possesses the power of Self-Suggestion and Word Magic.

As I watched Ludwig, with his determined expression, standing tall amidst the cheers of the crowd, I realized what I had been overlooking.

The current world's strongest, Saviolin Turner.

The next world's strongest, Ellen.

Another candidate for the world's strongest who should have died but survived, Olivia Lanze.

Harriet de Saint-Owan, with the greatest magical talent in history.

And me, who had recorded a tremendous growth in just one year with the ability called Infinite Aptitude.

So what?

-Wowww!

In the end, the protagonist is Ludwig.

The protagonist can convert willpower into strength. Anger, sorrow, vengeance, and longing are transformed into unbelievable power. Even if there's no reason, the world lends its strength to Ludwig as the winds blow.

Strength in situations where strength is needed.

Fate in situations where fate is needed.

The power I have.

Self-Suggestion is ultimately a knockoff of Ludwig's power.

The power to change will into strength originally belonged to Ludwig.

This world is created for the protagonist, and Ludwig will have everything he needs.

Ludwig looks somewhere.

Precisely, he looks at the inner stands.

I look down at Ludwig through the window.

Ludwig looks up at me.

The guy who said he'd meet me in the finals really ended up meeting me in the finals.

Nothing went as planned.

Believing that I could easily achieve a 10,000-point achievement challenge was

foolish from the start, as there was nothing easy about it.

I struggled against the underestimated Scarlett, and even though my defeat was imminent, I advanced to the finals due to her forfeit.

Greyden Amorel was utterly crushed by the overwhelming power of Ludwig.

With hard work, I believed that we could eventually catch up to them.

But Ludwig had cast aside his feebleness.

The progression of events had diverged so much from the original story that predictions were now impossible, rendering the situation meaningless.

He hadn't awakened any Magic Body Strengthenings nor employed any Supernatural abilities.

He was merely the protagonist.

With that single advantage, Ludwig had grown stronger.

After a brief respite, the final match was set to commence.

My physical condition was far from optimal. Yet, it wasn't so dire as to cause serious concern.

If I used Self-Suggestion, I would be able to face Ludwig, and if I used Magic Body Strengthening, I could potentially overpower him.

But there was no way of knowing whether that would be possible throughout all three sets.

If I failed to control my pace properly, I'd face the humiliating situation of losing not to Ludwig but to my own inability to manage my condition.

-The long-awaited final match is about to begin! A clash between the Royal Class A and B!

They avoid mentioning that it's a battle between the bottom-ranked competitors.

As the announcer speaks, Ludwig and I lock eyes. His once-playful face had turned stern.

Finally, a more appealing expression.

Ludwig, who had previously lacked seriousness, was now earnest.

"Did it have some effect?"

"It seems so."

Ludwig also seemed to find what had happened to him hard to believe. He stared at me intently.

"Can I catch up to you?"

"You still have much to learn, kid."

With my sword in hand, I smiled at Ludwig.

"Think that you can catch up. No, believe that you can trample over the likes of me and rise above."

"Haha… right. That's what it was."

Ludwig smiled as he looked at me. But it wasn't the clumsy smile he'd shown before.

"Still, it's strange. You're definitely strong, Reinhardt, but there are many people stronger than you…"

With his sword in hand, Ludwig sighed.

"At some point… it just didn't work."

"What didn't?"

"Imagining myself defeating you."

Ludwig's smile vanished from his face once more.

"It's just… hard to picture."

As I heard those words and saw that expression on Ludwig's face, I understood.

There was one other person who thought the same way.

That person, watching me from the stands.

There were many people stronger and more exceptional than that person.

But, I could never imagine defeating Ellen Artorius. Ellen would always be looking down on me from a much higher place, as if she were there to teach me swordsmanship.

In the original story, Ellen was that kind of existence for Ludwig.

A wall they could never surpass, no matter how hard they tried. An entity they would always have to look up to.

Now, looking at Ellen had become my role.

"You've grown so much stronger so quickly that I feel like, no matter how hard I try, you'll always be far ahead of me."

That's only natural.

While Ellen was already strong when she arrived, I started from a worse state than Ludwig and managed to surpass him by a significant margin.

That's why Ludwig's focus inevitably shifted from Ellen to me.

He can't help but wonder why he can't be like Reinhardt.

Ludwig felt the wall not with Ellen but with me, and he had no choice but to make me his goal.

Although Ellen may be stronger than me, Ludwig's objective can only be to overtake me.

An insurmountable wall.

For Ludwig, that wall is no longer Ellen but me.

In the original story, I've now taken the place that was once Ellen's.

-The highly anticipated finals of the first-year tournament! We'll begin right now!

The eternal rival and object of admiration for the protagonist.

Is that my role in this world?

"It may seem impossible, but I'll believe in it."

Ludwig takes a deep breath.

"That I can defeat you."

As I grip my sword, I face Ludwig.

There's only one thing I've taught Ludwig.

Make a commitment to victory, not a prepared excuse for defeat.

It may not be much, but it's what I've taught him.

"No."

And that is my specialty.

"You can't defeat me."

Ludwig looks at me and speaks.

"I will."

I also look at Ludwig and speak.

"I will."

And as we look at each other, we say simultaneously.

"Defeat you."

-Kruung!

A blue magical energy envelops my body, and Ludwig lunges at me with a determined step.

-Kwakang!

The moment our swords clash, they shatter as if they'd made a pact to do so.

CHAPTER 296

The sword broke.

But neither I nor Ludwig were flustered. As if he had known it would happen, Ludwig attempted to strike my head with the shattered sword's pommel.

"Ugh!"

Magic Body Strengthening.

I'll take the hit.

While allowing my head to be hit, I aimed a punch at Ludwig's abdomen.

-Crack!

-Thump!

"Ack!"

"Ugh!"

Ludwig, who had been struck in the abdomen, rolled on the ground several times before getting back up. Both of our weapons were broken, and there was no time to rearm ourselves.

Both Ludwig and I threw away our broken swords.

As Ludwig charged at me, I knew I had to finish this quickly since maintaining my Magic Body Strengthening for a long time would make the next set more difficult.

As Ludwig got up, I charged at him, aiming for a tackle.

After taking him down with a tackle, I went for a ground-and-pound.

That was my plan at this moment.

-Thud!

Ludwig fell to the ground, covering me in the process.

This moment should have been the end.

But just as I thought that, he grabbed my waist and flipped me over.

Magic Body Strengthening provides defense, but it doesn't increase body weight.

-Thud!

I lost my balance and flew backward in an instant.

This guy's insane.

His strength is already beyond that of a normal person, even without Magic Body Strengthening.

He's an even bigger monster than me.

My endurance is unstable.

Although my physical strength might be lacking, my endurance surpasses Ludwig's.

I don't know what kind of change has occurred in his body, but I can't face him without Self-Suggestion and Magic Body Strengthening.

I will win.

I never thought I'd stand as a rival, but since I've already stepped up, I can't back down easily.

Just like Ellen's existence was the driving force for Ludwig's growth in the original story.

I am the driving force that makes Ludwig stronger just by existing.

Moreover, since I started from the very bottom, I even stimulate Ludwig's faint jealousy and feelings of inferiority.

The stronger I become, the faster Ludwig's strength grows.

I can't lose to you.

I must remain a wall above you so that you can grow even stronger.

The protagonist must be strong.

Someday you'll be stronger than me, but for now, I must be stronger than you.

That's what it means to be a rival.

That's why I can't lose.

I seriously face him now, the guy I've always avoided due to our complicated relationship.

He considers me a serious rival, so I have no choice but to respond in kind.

In the end, the one who wins the last battle is the true winner.

You must lose to me now.

I'll concede the final victory, but until then, you must keep losing to me.

In order to do that, I think I can't lose, and I believe I won't lose.

"You can't beat me."

I declare that I will never be defeated.

"Ugh!"

As I charged at Ludwig and threw a punch, he dodged my arm with a simple gesture and tried to take me down by grabbing my arm and flipping me over.

However, as he pulled with his strength, I drove my knee up into Ludwig's chin.

-Smack!

"Kuk!"

Ludwig, who took a direct hit to the chin with my knee, fell over.

It's normal for one's consciousness to fly away, but Ludwig rolled a few times and got up.

He wasn't unscathed, as I could see crimson blood flowing from his gums.

He showed no sign of pain. I had to admit, he had incredible perseverance. Of course, in this situation, pain would be relatively less felt.

I cannot lose.

My goal in this tournament, which I initially entered to accumulate achievement points, has changed due to unexpected variables.

Scarlett and Ludwig, who were once just competitors, each symbolized me in different ways.

I thought we had no connection, but as a result of my actions so far, they both regarded me similarly, albeit in different ways.

Scarlett idolized me.

Ludwig saw me as a wall he wanted to overcome but felt he could never catch up to.

So, I will win overwhelmingly.

In order for that peculiar fellow, who wants to jump over walls he cannot climb, to grow, I have to do that.

So, show me.

Ludwig, his lips stained with crimson blood, charged at me.

I've created a world where the world is on your side, but I still have much more.

Self-Suggestion.

Magic Body Strengthening.

And my keen senses.

And having Ellen as my training partner.

In every aspect, Ludwig cannot catch up to me.

So, I'll crush him.

At this moment, my greatest weapon is not Magic Body Strengthening or Supernatural abilities, but my keen senses.

I read him with my senses.

Charging means shifting your center of gravity forward.

The important thing is timing.

If I can read at which step he will attack and how he will attack, I can counter it.

It's important to determine which foot he's putting pressure on, but even more crucial to watch his shoulders. By observing the shoulders, one can predict arm movements. A skilled fighter can punch without moving their shoulders, but neither Ludwig nor I are at that level.

If the waist moves instead of the arm, one can guess that a kick will be used for the attack.

The movements using a sword are ultimately not much different. All actions have a starting point, and it always originates from the body.

Ludwig's right shoulder pulls back as he charges.

His right shoulder retracting slightly means that his right arm will soon extend toward me.

In that case, he intends to plant his left foot and thrust his right fist into my face.

It was all too clear.

There are many ways to counter.

I could deflect his right fist and strike deep into Ludwig's face with my left fist, or I could use the momentum of his incoming right arm as a weapon to strike him down.

Once I read the incoming attack, the outcome is as good as decided.

I didn't dodge or block his attack.

Before Ludwig could even take a step forward and assume his attack stance, I lunged forward.

As Ludwig's left foot hit the ground, I knew he would pivot on it and move his right shoulder.

So, I struck one step ahead of him.

Just before the attack began.

-Thunk!

I kicked his left leg out just before it touched the ground.

"Ugh!"

As a result, it seemed as if he had charged me only to be kicked away.

The damage was greater since he hadn't anticipated this.

Ludwig couldn't get up this time as he rolled on the ground. My counter had been perfect, incorporating both Magic Body Strengthening and Self-Suggestion.

It would be strange if he could get up.

-First set! Due to the judgment of Ludwig's combat incapability, Reinhardt wins by default!

Ludwig couldn't even get up.

"Ugh……”

As the priests rushed over for healing, Ludwig looked up at me, still on the ground.

His gaze was like he was looking at an incomprehensible being.

In fact, I had knocked him down with just one accurate blow after seeing him charge.

I had read him perfectly. Whatever he does next, I'll read that too.

How could he possibly beat an opponent like me?

That was the expression on his face.

My characteristic, intuition, provided an excessive advantage. I smiled, wondering if it was because of the power I had gained through experiencing the most dangerous events in my life.

"I told you, you can't win."

"…"

Not yet.

I swallowed my next words.

It felt like I had become a villain.

No, I really am a villain. I am the Demon King, and Ludwig is the second hero of humanity after Ragan Artorius.

The hero who always loses to the Demon King.

But isn't he destined to catch up to the Demon King and bring justice one day?

It seemed like this overly perfect picture foretold my eventual downfall.

After receiving healing from the priests, Ludwig stood up.

"Let's do it again, Reinhardt."

His expression questioned whether he should make such an incomprehensible rival,

but Ludwig didn't give up.

"There won't be much difference."

"Still, we won't know unless we try."

He'll keep getting back up no matter how many times he falls.

He won't give up and will keep clashing against the odds.

I've always been the egg that breaks the rock, but he's the one who keeps throwing eggs until the rock breaks.

I don't think I'm superior to Ludwig.

A person who has never been broken, and a person who gets back up after being broken hundreds or thousands of times.

Ludwig will be much more magnificent than someone like me.

But greatness alone can't buy victory.

Right now, I am stronger, and Ludwig cannot overcome this gap.

The set score is 1:0! Reinhardt takes the first set! Now, the 1st-year tournament finals, set 2, is starting right away!

Woahhh!

In just two days, Ludwig and I had become accustomed to the cheering crowd as we received our replenished weapons.

This time, it's a sword.

What's the difference between a sword and a fist?

There were no more surprises in this already eventful 1st-year tournament.

I took an overwhelming victory in two consecutive sets.

Thus, I won.

I may be inferior to most close-combat major students in technical aspects, but I had the upper hand against Ludwig.

So, no matter how much his physical abilities increased, I was ahead with my Magic Body Strengthening, and his movements were easy to read.

From the beginning, it didn't make sense for me to give up even one set. Ludwig's only chance of victory was if I exhausted myself from overusing Magic Body Strengthening, but that didn't happen.

With my victory in the finals, the 1st and 2nd places were determined, and the matches for 3rd and 4th place between Scarlett and Grayden Amorel followed.

The result was Grayden Amorel's victory.

Thus, the 1st-year tournament came to a close.

I never thought I'd have a moment where I held a trophy like this in my life.

[Achievement Unlocked - 1st-Year Tournament Champion]

[You have gained 10,000 achievement points.]

This was the first time I scored so many points at once.

People sent me their cheers.

"Will I be able to catch up to you?"

Ludwig, who was utterly defeated, didn't seem desperate, but he seemed to have such doubts.

"You know what I'm supposed to say, right?"

“…Yeah."

Ludwig smiled at me.

"I should believe that I can catch up, right?"

"No."

I crossed my arms while holding the championship trophy.

"It's not about believing, you should think it's obvious that you will."

"Ah, right. That's how it is?"

Somehow.

It felt like the protagonist entered my Self-Suggestion school. Ludwig, holding the 2nd place trophy, said,

"I can catch up to you, Reinhardt."

"I keep telling you, it's impossible."

It's a strange religion where I don't agree with the future you've set, even though you tell me to believe it as truth.

We each believe in the future we've determined.

In the end, Ludwig and I had different foundations, but we both had similar powers.

Some strange things happened while trying to earn achievement points, but my plan didn't go too far off course.

I won.

From a distance, Ellen watched me.

She said she'd scold me if I didn't win.

But I won.

So, will she praise me now?

CHAPTER 297

"Praise me."

"What?"

"Praise me."

"What?"

We exchanged the same question and answer twice, and then Ellen and I stared at each other with puzzled expressions.

"You said you'd scold me if I didn't win! So now that I've won, you should praise me!"

"I never said I would praise you."

"Reinhardt is the best! I knew he would win, right, sis?!"

“…Your praise is so exaggerated that it doesn't feel very satisfying to hear."

"I feel hurt!"

Despite claiming she never agreed to praise me, Ellen eventually gave in. In the end, I won the tournament, which everyone had expected.

We fought and won our battles, but there were no hard feelings between us. Ludwig was Ludwig, and Scarlett was Scarlett – they were unique individuals.

Just like yesterday, all the A and B class members celebrated the victory together.

It was a festival, after all.

Both Harriet and Charlotte sincerely congratulated me on my win.

On the way back to the dormitory, Ellen stopped me for a moment. We waited for everyone else to leave until it was just the two of us.

"…"

Ellen hesitated.

She could have just praised me, but was it so unbearable to say that?

Her face turned a bit red.

"I… I know it's weird for me to say this…"

"What is?"

"…I was proud of you."

I felt like my head had gone completely blank at those unexpected words.

"I was proud of you."

It wasn't so much that I was happy, but rather,

It was embarrassing.

I mean, it's strange to say she was proud of me instead of saying I was great or cool!

"Are you my mom?"

At my words, Ellen's expression turned puzzled again. It seemed like she was acting as if she had raised me or something.

Didn't I feed her more than she fed me?

"I taught you, after all."

It felt like she was saying, "This hopeless kid became a tournament champion after just one year of my training!"

"So in the end, you're great, right?"

"Yes."

Ellen nodded and smiled.

"You followed me well all this time."

Faced with that smile and those words, I couldn't say anything else.

Most of who I am now was shaped by Ellen. She looks at me and smiles brilliantly.

"You've worked hard, Reinhardt. Congratulations."

"…"

In the end, even if everything was thanks to Ellen, I was the one who stubbornly learned swordsmanship while constantly bothering her.

Even with countless coincidences and cheats, I was the one who swung the sword, clashed, fell, and tried tenaciously to learn.

My strength may not have come solely from my efforts, but I can't say my efforts played no part.

That's why Ellen is acknowledging my hard work.

"Well… thanks."

After whining for praise, it feels a bit…

Strange.

Yeah.

I finally received praise from Ellen.

It seems that there's no one who's really upset about my victory, and Ludwig and Scarlett seem to have grown more fond of me. Overall, it's a good outcome.

"But,"

My shoulders were growing heavier, and my insides felt queasy as if something was piled on top of them.

It was because of the side effects of the Magic Body Strengthening. To overpower Ludwig, I had used Magic Body Strengthening throughout all three sets, and the physical fatigue was no joke.

It was reckless.

I wasn't at the point of fainting or vomiting blood, but I felt dizzy.

However, it didn't seem to be solely due to the Magic Body Strengthening.

I wanted to forget the feeling of being intoxicated by the joy of winning, but the more I tried to forget, the harder it was to do so.

Today was Tuesday.

Tomorrow was Wednesday.

"Ah…"

The cross-dressing contest.

It was coming up tomorrow.

Is this the feeling of eating mustard while crying?

My condition was only getting worse, and it didn't seem like it would improve.

In the end, I gave up my right to advance to the unrestricted tournament finals, as I was certain I wouldn't be in any condition to do anything after the cross-dressing contest.

Tuesday night.

The Magic Research Club's mansion.

Harriet de Saint-Owan was experimenting with something in the basement safe room of the mansion. It was a large laboratory equipped with barriers, defenses, and soundproofing magic, allowing for experimentation with even high-level destructive

magic.

Although there was an outdoor practice field, destructive magic usually came with a loud noise, so it was common to conduct experiments in a well-prepared place like this.

And since it was a festival now, there was no way to do such experiments outside.

Harriet was experimenting inside the safe room, and the other Magic Research Club members were watching her through the security window.

-Whoooosh

A jet of flame shot from Harriet's fingertips and struck a pile on the opposite wall.

-Boom!

With an explosion, this time, jets of flame burst from Harriet's head to her shoulders, wrapping around her.

It was a low-level destructive magic called Firebolt.

Five Firebolts were formed in an instant and hit their target simultaneously.

-Wham, wham, wham, boom!

The casting speed was incredibly fast, almost nonexistent.

From Harriet's wrist to her forearm, blue magical lines formed a strange pattern.

"We did it!"

"It worked…!"

"I can't believe this actually works…”

After that, Harriet demonstrated various spells, such as casting several low-level destructive magics in a row, including Lightning Bolt, or even firing Firebolts without casting them.

All of these were spells Harriet had mastered long ago. Even those who weren't majoring in destructive magic could perform them to some extent.

The only difference was that the casting was abnormally fast and even involved multi-casting.

As Harriet came out of the safe room, the Magic Research Club members all looked at her with shining eyes.

"So it's done now? Is it complete?"

In response to Christina's question, Harriet smiled weakly, looking tired.

"Somewhat. But I think we still need to make some improvements."

"Junior! You're really a genius!"

Redina jumped around, celebrating as if it were her own accomplishment.

"I never thought it would actually work…"

Louis Ancton mumbled with a flustered expression. Harriet laughed as she looked at the bewildered Louis.

"What's the matter? You're the one who made it, and now you're the one who's surprised?"

"No… I thought it would only work in theory, not exactly linked to reality…"

Louis Ancton couldn't believe the sight of the concept he had designed come to fruition.

"This, in my opinion, is a line of magic that no one but you can use. There's no way other magicians can do this. I didn't even think it would be possible in reality, just a theoretical idea!"

In other words, Harriet was using the tool Louis had created way too perfectly. Louis Ancton was a genius for creating such a thing in a short time, but Harriet was the only one who could use it, an even greater genius.

"Really? Well, that's good for me."

From Harriet's right arm, a blue glow flickered around her wrist, hidden beneath her sleeve, then disappeared.

"Ugh! Reinhardt won too."

Harriet yawned tiredly and let out a deep sigh.

"I should do something too."

The Unrestricted-Class Tournament was on a different level than the Freshman Tournament.

Harriet didn't think she'd be eliminated pathetically, even though she couldn't be sure who would win.

The Magic Research Club members knew what Harriet could do, so they didn't consider her confidence to be arrogant.

Olivia Lanze, a tactless, annoying person who kept intruding and spouting nonsense.

Harriet was determined to crush her arrogance.

That person would never expect to be hit from an entirely unexpected direction while focusing only on Ellen.

Wednesday.

Harriet was busy and not in the dormitory, and the students participating in Miss & Mister Temple seemed to be starting their preparations in earnest, as they were absent from their usual spots.

Soon, all my close friends would be busy with their own matters.

And I'm not free either.

"Reinhardt! We're going to watch the parade, do you want to come?"

Somehow, after the tournament, the guys who got even closer to me, the annoying trio, and Heinrich.

Kono Lint gestured at me.

"No, I need to rest."

"Ah… Did you push yourself too hard yesterday?"

"…Yeah."

Actually, I did push myself too hard, and my whole body feels like it weighs a ton. I want to rest, but I can't today.

I have to participate in the cross-dressing contest…

This event that increases my magic power by 5 could be the most important event of the festival…

My current magic power is 14.2, and if it goes up by 5, it will be 19.2.

If I can increase it by another 0.8, my magic control talent will awaken.

That's why I can't give up.

Ultimately, the fact that my close friends aren't bothering me to go somewhere today turned out to be a good situation for me.

No one will be around to care where I went. So even if I go to the cross-dressing contest and come back, I won't have to hear any questions about where I've been.

I can't believe I snuck out of the dorm to participate in a cross-dressing contest and came back!

I must be really out of my mind!

Yeah… I am indeed a lunatic who sold my soul and dignity for events and challenges. Ever since I confessed to Kono Lint as a woman, I crossed a river of no return.

It's all my karma.

If I just kept quiet, maybe half of it would have worked out, but that candy peddler jerk found out something strange, and since then, he's been making me do this kind of stuff.

If I hadn't done such things, I might have gotten some other giveaway event during this festival.

It's my fault, it's my fault. It's all my fault.

The cross-dressing contest takes place at night.

Of course, it's not in a huge space like the main stadium, but it seems to be held in a place like a lecture hall in a regular class, and I already know the location.

It's currently lunchtime.

The contest starts at 6 in the evening.

But I had to start preparing now. I can put on and take off the dress by myself, but I can't do my makeup alone.

First, I'll go outside the temple, get my makeup done by Eleris, and then come back with the dress.

Obviously, I plan to leave and return wearing a hood.

Fortunately, during the festival, the temple gate is more lenient with access control, including checking IDs.

I'll finish all the preparations outside the temple, then kill time in a secluded place until the contest starts, and rush in.

There's no point in wandering around the temple anyway.

I don't know why I'm considering various possibilities for such a secret operation.

In reality.

This is a million times more nerve-wracking than the tournament! What if someone recognizes me? What if someone sees me? What if the host suddenly says it's Reinhardt?

Should I just not go? After all, my magical power will increase with time, isn't it too much to risk my life for it? Do I really need to control magic? I also have a language talent, right?

Yeah, there's no need to be greedy here, right?

My head was spinning, but I was leaving the dorm with a half-empty expression on my face.

The streets were crowded with the ongoing festival. But no matter where they were going, I didn't have the energy to care.

I was considering giving up on the cross-dressing contest while simultaneously worrying about what kind of expression I should make to look less like Reinhardt, and it felt like my brain was splitting in two.

No, the brain is originally divided into left and right hemispheres.

I was losing my mind so much that I even forgot the obvious things.

I don't even know what state of mind I was in when I left, and it's broad daylight.

Eleris was still running her shop. It still seemed like the business wasn't doing well.

But today, I told her to close the shop and wait at home.

In the residential area near Aligar Shopping Street.

When I knocked on the door of the basement room, Eleris opened it for me.

"Have you arrived, Your Highness?"

"Yeah."

It seemed Eleris had already finished preparing, as the room was neatly cleaned, and the makeup tools were laid out.

Eleris examined my complexion and tilted her head.

"Did the tournament… not go well?"

"No, I won."

"But your expression… Ah."

As if she had forgotten the reason why my expression had to be bad despite the happy news of winning, Eleris slightly quivered her lips and nodded her head.

“…Still, you did well, Your Highness. It's a remarkable growth."

"Thanks…”

Eleris, who said words that were either praise or consolation, sat me down in a chair.

"Shall we… start right away?"

“…Might as well. There's no point in dragging it out."

We both had grim expressions.

For now, I washed my face and changed my facial structure to the one I had previously sculpted through Sarkegaar's ring.

It's a subtle change, but with makeup and a different expression, I would look like a completely different person.

In the reflection of the mirror Eleris had summoned, my face had slightly changed its shape but was still bare, and only my hair had turned silver.

“…Why? Oh, no. No. Don't say anything."

Even I think it's strange! I barely changed it and haven't put on makeup yet, but it's already different!

It's like insisting that a drawing of a girl is actually a boy, that kind of situation!

“…I'll start."

“…Yeah."

The beginning of a hellish time.

It's just one day.

After this day, there will be no more occasions for this dreadful appearance.

No matter how hellish everything in the world may be, once it's over, memories become trivial. Just as dawn comes even if a rooster's head is twisted. Time flows anyway, and even if the world turns upside down, the cross-dressing contest ends today!

No matter how slow time goes, tomorrow will come, and when tomorrow comes, I'll part ways with this dirty appearance, and all that will remain for me are the inflated magic power and achievement points!

When it's over, I'll think that I did well back then. I'll endure the shame and take pride in doing this!

I lay out excuses for self-justification for myself.

Ah…

At this rate, I feel like I'm going to level up in Self-Suggestion.

CHAPTER 298

I had finished preparing long ago. Anyway, there was plenty of time.

I had already changed my hair to the same color as before. The expression on my face was important, but changing my hair color also played a part.

Thanks to the efforts of Eleris and myself, my original appearance was significantly faded.

"Ah, um, well."

And then, one of the most important things.

My voice.

I changed it to an ambiguous voice, not overly feminine nor masculine. If I had used my original voice, someone might have recognized me just by hearing it.

It's sad that all of these details, like making myself look somewhat unlike Reinhardt and changing my voice to be ambiguous, are for the sake of not getting caught.

If I were completely someone else, I could have just changed 180 degrees.

I wish… Miss Temple had done this instead…

With the final insurance in place, there was no reason to hesitate.

All that was left was to return to the temple in time for the start of the cross-dressing contest.

However, if I went back exactly on time, who knows what could happen. From the start, the participants needed to gather earlier than the start time for preparation.

So, I spent my time in Eleris's basement room and then headed out to Aligar Shopping Street.

I was dressed in casual clothes.

Of course, not in the temple uniform or women's clothes. For now, I had just done my makeup and changed my face and body shape a bit.

Wait… didn't that mean I changed everything?

Wearing a hood on my robe in case someone saw me, I carried a trunk with me.

It felt like I was going on some secret mission.

Is one's status really that important?

Do I have to go this far?

Between feelings of guilt and self-justification, I slowly made my way toward the Aligar Shopping Street.

Inside the station, there were shops set up as I always checked. Of course, the scale had expanded since the beginning.

The merchant guild had realized that the business they initially thought would be nice to have was actually very profitable, so they continued to expand their investment. The number of shops seemed to be gradually increasing, from simple snack shops to others.

Soon, the moment when it would be difficult for the Rotary Club members alone to support the scale of the business would come, and then they would have to borrow the hands of others beyond the club.

At this rate, a structure like an underground shopping center in a large terminal could emerge. I don't know when that will happen.

Anyway, it's a fact that the club's earnings are increasing exponentially.

Even if other organizations or merchants enter the scene, it wouldn't be bad. We hold the business rights, so there are countless ways to make money, whether by receiving royalties, taking a cut like a landlord, or earning through the hands of others.

If we don't like the businesses that have set up shop, we can use our business rights to kick them out. That's what power is.

It's surprising that I, who never thought of such things, can now have these malicious thoughts without a care.

Anyway.

In front of the shops at Aligar Shopping Street.

Aligar Shopping Street was like the Yongsan District in Seoul, with a large floating population and famous for its shopping district. Of course, the merchants there were more infamous for being ruthless.

I saw some kids loitering around the shops.

"How much is this?"

"Ah, that's ten fairy tales."

"And that one?"

One of them was asking a club member in charge of the shop about the prices, while the others were sneakily watching from the club member's blind spot.

What are these kids up to?

One of them acted as a lookout, while the others discreetly stuffed goods into their clothes. The busy passersby either didn't notice or ignored them without saying anything.

Sigh.

Compared to the disputes I had during my time as a subway vendor, this is a rather cute act.

But still.

A meal is a meal.

Where are these yellow-blooded brats coming from?

As I approached the little saplings of budding organized criminals, a sudden noise erupted.

"Smack!"

"Ouch!"

"I caught these brats!"

Someone had come out of nowhere and grabbed the two kids by the scruff of their necks.

"!"

Realizing the situation had gone awry, the kid who was distracting the counter tried to run away.

"Get that guy!"

Following the order of the person who caught the first two kids, someone else who had been waiting jumped out and nabbed the fleeing kid in a flash.

The sudden arrest of the three kids for theft attracted the attention of the passersby.

Wait, who are these guys?

Their outfits didn't look like guards.

And they didn't seem to be club members either, as the shopkeeper, also a club member, looked just as bewildered as I was.

"You little brats don't know how long we've been waiting for you, do you?"

Smack!

"Ouch!"

As the kid's cheek was being slapped, I could only watch blankly.

"You too!"

"Ouch!"

Smack!

"You half-witted brats!"

Smack!

"Ouch! Hic, hic!"

"I'll lock you up in an underground dungeon for the rest of your lives without seeing the sun…"

Smack!

"…?"

Without realizing it, my body moved forward. I found myself grabbing the hand of the guard who was relentlessly slapping the child's face.

"…What?"

"Ah, no… I know they did wrong… but why… go this far?"

Even so, is it right to hit a child like this?

"I don't know who you are, but these three have committed theft in every station, with over twenty counts so far. They're considered serious criminals, like social evils. There's no need for a lady like you to worry about them."

Ah, a lady?

At those words, it felt like my head was being bleached…

No, my hair is silver, so it's already bleached.

But were these three professional thieves?

Twenty times?

They've stolen from others twenty times?

Did they deserve a beating? No, I want to beat them too, but is it really that bad?

People were watching the sudden commotion with confused expressions - the thugs hitting the kids, me who jumped in to stop them, and the kids who started crying after being hit.

Seeing that I had appeared as if to save them, but then hesitating as the gazes around us changed, the kids became even more frightened.

"Still, they did something wrong, yes. But doing this… in front of all these people… it's kind of… awkward, isn't it?"

Awkward… What a word to use…

Was it too awkward given the situation? I added another remark without backing down, and the leader-like thug's eyebrows narrowed.

"Miss, this is none of your concern. Just go on your way."

It was a threat.

No matter how I looked at them, they weren't security guards.

Their attire wasn't much different from ordinary passersby.

But by now, I had some discernment.

The thick wrists, neck, trapezius muscles, and forearms of those holding the kids, as well as the calluses on their palms.

Just by looking at those things, I could tell something.

They weren't just thugs.

They were trained people, and quite a lot.

I didn't want to cause any more trouble in this messy situation. The kids were looking at me as if pleading for help.

No, it wouldn't help you even if I looked back, right?

I didn't want to make a fuss anymore. I didn't know who these people were, but if I kept provoking them here, there was a high chance I'd get caught up in a troublesome situation.

I didn't want them to find out I was the Temple Royal Class Reinhardt!

Seeing that I seemed to be backing down, the thug chuckled.

"Seems like you've never had a hard time, all thanks to your pretty face. Be careful in the future. The world isn't so easy."

Ah.

The feeling of losing it.

It's been a while.

"You guys are jerk, really."

“…What?"

"Someone who hasn't learned how to hit a child on the street, acting all high and mighty."

My unexpected cursing changed his expression rapidly.

I had lost it and there was no stopping me now.

"Who the hell are you guys anyway? You're not security guards. This is a job for the security guards, not for some no-good bastards like you."

"I warned you to be careful."

"Careful, what the hell are you…”

-Smack!

"!"

"Ha, if you try to sneak away, your hand goes first, huh?"

I grabbed the thug's hand as he tried to slap my cheek. He was astonished that his arm had been caught.

That's right, my strength is still the same even though my size has decreased. My self-suggestion is still the same. I glared at him.

"Are you confident?"

I'm not the old Reinhardt.

Well, of course…

Today is different in a lot of ways…

"Sigh… doing crap like this attracts crappy people…"

His eyes changed, and there was a strange light in them.

My instincts sensed it.

Killing intent.

From this moment on, if the guy tries to use force, I have to fight back in earnest. As a mental battle unfolds between the man and me, a hidden contest begins that others cannot see.

"Enough."

A voice cuts through the silence, interrupting us.

"What's going on?"

Someone appears, cutting through the murmuring crowd.

"Yo-young master…”

“…I thought I clearly told you not to cause a commotion."

Bertus, with a calm expression, approached us.

Wait.

Why is he here?

I'm screwed.

I don't know what happened, but it seems like I'm in trouble.

"I'm sorry."

“…No, I was also rude…”

I stiffly watched as Bertus apologized while pouring tea.

Bertus didn't recognize me at all.

I never thought my disguise would be verified in this place. It's only natural that he didn't recognize me, as I had changed my appearance with thick makeup and various alterations.

Feeling relieved that he really couldn't recognize me but also breaking into a cold sweat because I didn't know when I might be exposed.

"Due to the Temple Festival, there's been an influx of magical train passengers, which has led to various inconveniences. As a result, additional security forces have been deployed, some of whom are not in their usual guard uniforms. These people are not professionals in this field, so they may overreact at times. I understand that this might be uncomfortable for you."

"Ah, no… I didn't know that…”

"But their response was undoubtedly wrong, and they will be disciplined according

to internal regulations. Although it may not be enough, would you please forgive them?"

"Y-yes! Of course!"

I wondered what Bertus was doing away from the Temple dormitory. He was here.

Bertus didn't reveal that he was the crown prince.

He simply introduced himself as the person in charge of the operation and security of the magic trains during the festival.

During the Temple Festival, people from all over the continent gather at the Imperial Road. The population swells, and so does the number of magic train passengers. People flock not only to the Temple but also to the Imperial Road.

It seemed like Bertus was more focused on managing the practical aspects of the festival rather than enjoying it in order to build up his achievements.

He must be thinking that he has to build up some sort of achievement with his rival Charlotte around.

This guy is a workaholic.

Charlotte is having fun, though…

Still, I preferred seeing Charlotte enjoying the festival rather than working.

Unexpectedly, I found out that Bertus had been away from his post because he was in charge of the overall operation of the magic trains during the festival.

It seemed that he was here at Aligar Shopping Street to handle various incidents that occurred, and he had set up an ambush, anticipating that the little thieves who had committed more than twenty thefts would appear around here.

So he had ordered them to be caught, but I ended up witnessing the officers, whose adrenaline had skyrocketed while chasing the thieves, raising their fists.

This is such a terrible coincidence.

A far too terrible coincidence.

At this exact moment, I meet Bertus.

It's so frustrating! Is this on purpose? Why is this happening to me!

Bertus was apologizing to me, without revealing his identity as the crown prince.

Bertus is just destined for greatness.

I can't deny it anymore.

He's got the emperor's aura.

"Since I didn't know the details… I'm sorry as well."

Now that I knew that the guy who was beating up the kids was actually something like a plainclothes police officer, there was nothing more to say. The kids would face legal consequences, and the guy would be punished for not being able to control himself and trying to punch an innocent person.

There's no reason to stay here anymore.

Above all, I don't want to stay in Bertus's sight any longer!

"Then, I'll be going…"

"But, your silver hair."

Bertus's voice stopped me from getting up.

"It's a rare hair color."

"It's… dyed."

"Ah, is that so?"

Bertus narrowed his eyes as he looked at me.

"By any chance, are you a Temple student?"

“…Huh? Why do you ask?"

"No. You just look… familiar."

Damn it.

Damn it! I need to run!

But, Bertus seemed surprised by his own words and widened his eyes in confusion.

"Ah! I didn't mean anything by it. Really. It's just… you look familiar… um, never mind. That must have sounded strange."

Realizing that what he said might have sounded like an accusation, Bertus closed his mouth.

Awkward silence.

I need to run, but when should I seize the opportunity? Bertus seemed to be struggling to find the right words, thinking that he had said something weird, while I was just waiting for the right moment to escape.

“…Are you going on a trip or something?"

Bertus asked, looking at my trunk.

Should I just say that I'm going on a trip?

"Um, just… yes."

I mumbled vaguely as I held the teacup. It was the black tea that Bertus had poured for me.

Teacup.

'This guy doesn't even know the etiquette of holding a teacup, so he can't be a noble.'

A memory from a long time ago suddenly flashed across my mind.

How should I hold this teacup? Just by looking at the way he holds it, doesn't he hold

the teacup exactly like Reinhardt? Isn't this how it's done?

No, there's no way Bertus would remember such a thing!

But what if he does remember?

I felt so uneasy about everything that I thought I was going crazy.

You crazy bastard, just hold it together! Why did you make such a mess?

Even if the situation is malicious, I'm the one who started it all!

Struggling with the urge to smash my own head, I grabbed the teacup with both hands.

Of course, my hands shook uncontrollably, as if I had some kind of tremor. Bertus quietly watched me.

"Uh, I have a bit of a tremor… that's why."

"Oh, really?"

I finally managed to take a sip with both hands holding the teacup.

My attempt to act casual only made my behavior even more bizarre.

"It's surprising to see someone so young with a tremor."

Bertus also picked up his teacup.

Right, a tremor at this age? It's strange, isn't it? Is there no other reason? A young person with a tremor?

"It's due to alcohol addiction."

"Pfft!"

Bertus was so shocked by my response that he accidentally spat out the tea he was drinking.

All over my face.

"…"

"Uh, I-I'm so sorry!"

Bertus, genuinely flustered, pulled out a handkerchief, hesitated to wipe my face, and fumbled awkwardly.

“…It's fine."

I wiped my face with the handkerchief Bertus handed me.

A young person with a tremor, due to alcohol addiction. An improvised answer, yet it couldn't be more absurd.

Bertus seemed genuinely taken aback, as if he never expected to commit such a rude act in his life.

Carefully, I wiped my face with the handkerchief.

Damn it. What if my makeup comes off? Why am I even worrying about this?

"Well, I should be going now…”

"I'm truly sorry…”

Bertus bowed his head apologetically, seemingly disheartened. In a way, it was better that he was so flustered.

He clearly thought I was leaving early because of his rudeness.

Fortunately, my disguise was convincing enough to deceive even the perceptive Bertus.

"May I… ask for your name?"

As I was about to leave the stationmaster's office, Bertus asked me from behind.

I hadn't thought of a fake name for my female disguise!

I'm already 'real' enough as it is.

But I don't want to be any more 'real' here!

“…There's nothing good about knowing who I am."

“…I see."

Leaving Bertus's subtle reaction behind, I fled the scene as if escaping.

CHAPTER 299

After the mysterious woman left,

Bertus wiped the cold sweat off his forehead.

'How could I make such a mistake?'

His mistake was so rude that it went beyond being disgraceful. Cold sweat dripped all over his body.

If someone had done such a thing to him, he would have had murderous impulses. Bertus had never seen or heard of anyone spitting their tea in someone's face, nor had he ever imagined it.

It was an extremely rude act that went beyond the limit.

However, the woman seemed flustered, but not angry.

It was an absurd response.

Her hands shook excessively, making Bertus wonder why someone whose identity he didn't know would be so tense.

Suddenly, she claimed alcohol addiction.

It was an answer that didn't fit her noble appearance.

Her attire was not luxurious and quite ordinary. It was hard to tell what was inside the large trunk, but it didn't seem to be a luxury item.

Strictly speaking, she looked like a well-raised commoner's daughter.

Her distinctive features were her silver hair that seemed to shimmer and her delicate, picturesque facial features. Although her makeup seemed heavy, it didn't feel out of place.

She was a peculiar person.

From afar, Bertus heard her sharp voice even as he was walking towards the commotion.

"Heh, a good-for-nothing brat who loses control of their hand first?"

"Do you have confidence?"

It wasn't something a well-raised young lady would say.

"Your Highness…"

Bertus was startled.

"Oh, sit down."

Bertus saw the man who approached him and the other two men who accompanied him.

Despite Bertus not saying a word, they knelt in front of him instead of sitting on chairs. Bertus crossed his legs and folded his arms, looking at the three men kneeling before him.

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sorry!"

"Can you not understand my words about aiming for safe operation and management of the magical train and stations? Not only do you make the citizens uncomfortable, but you even tried to slap them?"

"I apologize, Your Highness!"

The man who eventually lost his temper and tried to hit the mysterious young lady.

These three men were not ordinary soldiers but Bertus's knights.

In other words, they were knights of the Salerian Duchy family.

Bertus smirked.

"How much did you receive?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's fortunate that nothing happened. If you had actually slapped her, I would have had to hear about the chief security officer letting citizens be beaten for a week, and my half-sibling would have just watched me self-destruct. It's a shame. Is it because the young lady is an unusual person who could block your slap with one hand? Huh? It's really fortunate that she didn't ruin my week's worth of effort, isn't it?"

"I, I apologize. I was short-sighted."

"How much did you get paid? I don't understand. Why would you do such a crazy thing if you didn't get paid by Charlotte? Tell me, how much did you get from my half-sister?"

At Bertus's malicious joke, the expressions of the three knights from the Salerian Duchy turned pale.

Curiously, Bertus's speech and mannerisms now resembled Reinhardt.

"Please kill us, Your Highness!"

Although Bertus was disgusted, he had no intention of killing the three knights.

Once knights become part of the privileged class, especially those closely connected to powerful families, they often transcend the law.

Some of them come to believe that the privileges they have are derived from themselves, leading to excessive ignorance and arrogance.

Among the knights of the Salerian Duchy, there were such people.

They would boss around the guards and kill people without taking responsibility. They thought it was fine to kill a few citizens.

Trying to strike a citizen in public was quite a foolish act.

"If you try to ruin my week like this again, it will be interesting."

After speaking with a fierce expression, Bertus abandoned them.

Even if they were competent, short-sighted individuals were useless.

Those who enjoy wielding their swords should be sent where they can do so frequently.

Bertus had already decided where to transfer the three.

Had they only tried to strike the petty thief, it would have been one thing, but the problem would have been much greater had they hit the citizen trying to stop the situation.

Bertus didn't see it clearly, but he heard that the silver-haired girl had caught the knight's wrist.

She seemed incapable of using much strength.

Even without full power, it was impressive that she could catch a knight's arm with one hand. Of course, Bertus knew that physique and physical strength didn't always correlate, as he had seen some unconventional examples.

Who was she?

For the first time in his life, Bertus was very curious about the identity of the person he had spat tea on.

'I feel like I've seen her somewhere before… '

And strangely, she felt familiar.

It wasn't her face or expression.

"Are you confident?"

Somehow.

Her words and actions felt familiar.

However, the silver-haired girl's impression was so strong that Bertus couldn't think of anyone else.

The way she was flustered when facing him seemed somewhat adorable.

'...It's not good that such a noble person knows me.'

And it seemed like she knew who he was, even though he had never mentioned it. Of course, it wasn't that strange since his face wasn't completely unknown.

Who could it be?

What kind of person was she?

Bertus became restless due to the sudden incident.

It was already frustrating to have encountered Bertus by such a dog-like coincidence. But the fact that it could have been avoided if he had just watched the children get hit and moved on made it even more frustrating.

"Ah, it feels like I've actually become this kind of person after living like this."

"But, isn't hitting children like that a bit too much?"

"...Even though it's the right thing to say, it feels messed up coming from me at this point."

"I shouldn't worry about it."

"There's no way Bertus would come to see something like a crossdressing contest. He's busy with important tasks and probably won't even have time to visit the temple area."

As the temple grew closer, my steps became heavier.

I really...

I really don't want to go...

But I have to.

It's all for my own good.

I have no choice but to go…

Dragging the trunk felt like dragging a chunk of iron.

At least I made up my mind on one thing.

If I let my temper take control, things could get weird.

For now, whatever happens, I must endure it. If I don't, it could get worse.

"Why am I…"

Kono Lint stared blankly into the air with unfocused eyes. At the moment, Lint was wearing a women's dress provided by the event organizers.

Kono Lint wanted to cut off his own tongue for making such a pointless remark.

'A crossdressing contest, today?'

'What's that?'

Heinrich von Schwarz, Cayer Voiden, Erhi de la Rafaeli, and Kono Lint were all enjoying the festival together.

'They're accepting applications until tonight.'

Lint had brought up the subject simply out of malicious intent, thinking he wouldn't be the one participating.

'Let's play rock-paper-scissors. The loser will participate in the contest. What do you think?'

Sometimes, boys engage in strange bets.

To be precise, they take pointless risks just to see each other's embarrassment.

‘…What? Why should I participate? Are you insane?'

'Why not? It'll be fun!'

How humiliating would it be?

Seeing each other's faces, soaked in shame and doing something they'd never want to do in front of so many people. The sense of exhilaration from witnessing that shame.

A lifetime of teasing.

There's no reason not to watch. Naturally, everyone reacted with mixed feelings.

Kono Lint felt this way until he made the suggestion.

'As long as it's not me, right?'

There were four candidates, so the odds were one in four.

It was a gamble that couldn't be refused.

Before rational judgment could take over, Kono Lint declared the challenge.

'If you don't play, you participate!'

And the result was…

"…”

Kono Lint now found himself in the waiting room behind the auditorium where the crossdressing contest was being held.

Thinking, "as long as it's not me" meant that it would be someone, and that someone was Kono Lint.

Although the odds were the same, it was strange how the person who suggested it first often ended up being the chosen one – and Kono Lint was that person.

"Hey, can you stay still?"

"Ah, okay…"

"Look at your face. What's wrong with your skin? Your makeup isn't even sticking properly. Tsk."

Liana de Grantz was applying makeup to Kono Lint's face.

Usually, Liana would look down on him like a mere chicken or cow. Yet now he's enjoying the honor of having the noble daughter of a duke family apply makeup to his face personally.

Under normal circumstances, this would be an emotional and heart-pounding experience, but for Kono Lint, it felt like dying in real-time.

'What? A crossdressing contest?'

'Do you guys have that kind of hobby?'

'As punishment?'

'Ah, him?'

'Hehe. Great. Ah, yes. That's fun! Ah, hahaha! Makeup? Sure. I'll do it, no big deal! Hey! I'll do it as much as you want! Where is it? Today?'

Although she had no intention of doing makeup, friends are known to enthusiastically cooperate in times of misfortune like this.

Everyone knew that Liana was only supporting Ellen and Cliffman for the Mister and Miss Temple contest, so they all sought out Liana.

As if their sour attitudes never existed, once Kono Lint decided to participate in the crossdressing contest, they successfully enlisted Liana, who usually barely spoke to them.

It was fun, so Liana was not only doing Kono Lint's makeup in the backstage waiting room where the crossdressing contest was held, but she even picked out clothes for him.

Of course, Liana did not lend her own clothes.

As she dressed him in one of the many women's outfits prepared by the organizers, Liana agonized over the makeup and even tried fitting wigs.

After much contemplation, Liana clicked her tongue.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

"No matter what I do, it's just funny."

"…"

As if saying that no matter how hard she tried, it was only ridiculous, Liana chuckled while looking at Lint's appearance.

Similar scenes were unfolding around them. Since the contest wasn't big, the so-called waiting room was nothing more than a large hall behind the main hall. Some sighed heavily, while others had someone else do their makeup, like Lint.

Most of them wore unhappy expressions.

Some were diligently touching up their makeup in the mirror, which was even harder to watch.

And over there, what was that? A giant human tank wearing the largest size dress, which looked like a mini-skirt.

It was more grotesque to see him unable to bear the shame of his appearance.

This place was hell.

Kono Lint pondered who was more wicked: the demons of hell or the audience who came to laugh at them.

Thankfully, only Liana, who was helping with makeup and coordination, could laugh at the scene, as participants were limited to bringing only one person to help.

It was his big mouth that caused the problem.

Feeling guilty wouldn't change anything now.

Participant number 1.

Kono Lint had a tag with his number pinned to his chest.

It was even number 1.

They said the participant numbers were assigned randomly, not by the order of application.

Yet he, the last to apply, had to be the first one to go.

That's why he wanted to die even more.

"Why couldn't you have been born prettier?"

"How is that my fault… Why do I have to be born pretty… I'm a man…"

"Really? But you're not exactly good-looking either."

"Please save me…"

As Liana continued to apply makeup on him, she couldn't help but chuckle and lightly tease him.

There was no one else to blame.

He could only resent himself for getting into this hellish situation.

In the midst of the chaotic dressing room, where they were preparing for the competition and trying to hold back their laughter, Kono Lint found himself staring at someone.

A person wearing a robe was sitting in a secluded corner.

That person seemed to be a participant.

Her face was not visible because of the hood she wore, but her silver hair, a beautiful jawline, and shimmering pink lips were noticeable.

The person had a different aura altogether.

Without interacting with anyone, she just sat there quietly, until someone approached her.

It was someone who appeared to be part of the organizing team.

Although he couldn't hear their conversation, they seemed to be discussing something, and then the person nodded her head, took off her hood, and revealed her face.

For a moment, Kono Lint was speechless.

And so were the other participants who had caught a glimpse of the person.

The organizer also nodded their head, seeming to understand something.

"What are you staring at?"

Liana turned her gaze to the same direction as Kono Lint's, and she dropped the makeup she was holding.

“…What? Women can participate too? No, that can't be right?"

Liana mumbled in confusion.

It was obvious that it couldn't be true, but she couldn't help but say that.

A girl.

Or rather, not a girl, but a girl-like figure.

After finishing their conversation with the organizer, the girl-like figure put their hood back on.

"Is that person really a guy?"

Liana turned to Kono Lint, asking with a startled expression. Although her face was no longer visible,

"How would I know…”

Both of them, and everyone else who had seen the silver-haired participant, were left in a state of bewilderment.

Kono Lint even thought he had made eye contact with the girl(?) just before she had pulled her hood back up.

He had clearly seen the girl's face turning bright red.

'Could it be…?'

For a brief moment, Kono Lint felt something from the girl's expression and attitude.

'Is she attracted to me?'

Kono Lint found himself entertaining a strange thought.

Participant number 40.

At least, Lint could see the number attached to the girl's chest.

He could also see the girl mumbling something under their hood.

-Why the hell is she here… Why…?

Of course, he couldn't know that most of it was just curses muttered under her breath.

CHAPTER 300

As the start time for the competition approached, everyone, except for the participants and the organizers, had to leave the waiting room.

"I've done my best."

Despite wearing a wig and full makeup, Liana left the waiting room laughing at the comical appearance of Kono Lint, who couldn't help but look ridiculous.

All that remained were about forty participants in the cross-dressing competition.

Most of them had a rather gloomy expression, as if they had committed some crime. Of course, there were also those who looked surprisingly good in their cross-dressing outfits.

These were probably people who had a penchant for this sort of thing.

With over a hundred thousand students in the temple, it's not impossible that some would have such a taste.

And among them, someone who looked extremely dangerous and stood out.

Participant number 40, wearing a hood.

That person was so anxious and nervous that he was biting his nails.

Kono Lint knew the situation was terrible, but he wondered why that person was so anxious.

If he was that anxious, why did he bother to participate?

Was he in the same situation as him?

"Alright, the competition will begin soon. Participant number 40, please remove your hood."

"…"

The participant didn't seem to hear the announcer's instructions and continued to look confused.

"Please remove it."

"…"

Finally, with no choice, he removed the hood. The other participants couldn't help but be speechless at the sight.

"…"

No way.

Is that a man?

That was the look on everyone's face.

Participant number 40, while in a situation where he couldn't possibly smile, somehow managed to put on a strained, forced smile.

"……Did you mistakenly think this was the Miss Temple competition?"

"Maybe……"

A couple of participants nearby murmured as if they knew each other, and Kono Lint began to wonder if that was really the case. In fact, that seemed even more plausible.

Yes, there could be no other explanation.

That face couldn't belong to a man.

That's how everyone started to understand.

They all became convinced that the beautiful girl had mistakenly submitted her application to the cross-dressing competition instead of the Miss Temple competition, and that's why she didn't know how to react to this strange situation.

It would be panic-inducing to see a room full of men in dresses, some even wearing huge ones, when you thought you applied for the Miss Temple competition!

It's obvious she wants to leave, but she's too shy and embarrassed to do anything!

Even though the organizers didn't say anything, everyone began to feel sympathy for the blushing girl (though she wasn't blushing at all).

In the end, someone had to step up.

They had to escort her out, as this was no place for her.

The chivalry that sprouted in everyone's hearts finally took action in one person.

"Um, excuse me."

It was the human tank wearing a dress.

"...?"

Participant number 24, the burly and imposing human tank. In a place where most people didn't look good in cross-dressing, the one who looked the least fitting approached the beautiful girl.

Kono Lint was horrified in his mind.

'No! Anyone but you shouldn't step forward!'

The giant figure was too monstrous to approach the delicate, fragile-looking girl.

The massive, muscular creature in a dress, with long blonde hair from a wig, looked even more vicious as the magical warrior approached the girl.

The girl just stared blankly up at the approaching giant.

She wore an awkward smile, but the corners of her mouth were trembling.

It was clear that she was terrified.

Kono Lint was sure that he himself would foam at the mouth and collapse if such a

monster approached him like that.

But of course, the human tank, Richard Howlman, thought he was behaving like a gentleman and tried to offer a gentle smile, completely oblivious to his own appearance.

"It seems like you might have chosen the wrong competition…"

"…?"

"This is the cross-dressing competition, not the Miss Temple contest."

He may have intended to sound cool, but the situation, his outfit, and the fact that he was a participant in the cross-dressing competition made him anything but.

Naturally, all eyes were drawn to him. The silver-haired girl's eyes rolled around.

She seemed to want to say something, but also didn't, her lips trembling with tension.

"Don't be scared. This is just a simple event. So, if you explain it well to the organizers, you can leave…"

The same thought crossed everyone's minds.

That guy. He clearly thinks he's amazing.

Identifying the girl's background class by utilizing his current gentleness and consideration, and maybe even scoring a promise for a meal later on?

The girl, perhaps thinking that silence would not drive away the magical warrior before her, nervously opened her mouth, her lips quivering.

"…I'm… a guy."

Eventually, an ambiguous, indistinct voice, making it hard to tell if it was male or female, flowed from the girl's mouth.

"Pardon?"

Richard Howlman, seemingly convinced that he must have misheard, asked again with a confused expression.

The girl, no, number 40 who revealed she wasn't a girl, bit her lip slightly.

Of course, she was just angry at the monstrous figure in front of her who couldn't understand her words.

Get lost, you bastard.

Her actions were driven by such thoughts, but to others, it seemed like a gesture of resentment towards someone causing her trouble.

Anger and resentment.

Similar but subtly different.

Everyone misunderstood the pitiful creature in their own way.

When the magical warrior wasn’t able to be dismissed with a single word, number 40 said curtly.

"I… I came to the right event…”

"!"

At those words, not only Richard Howlman but also the expressions of the others froze.

Sometimes, people find it hard to believe what they see.

They couldn't believe what they saw, and now they had it confirmed verbally.

That creature claims to belong to the same biological category as themselves.

"It… it can't be…”

Richard Howlman wore an expression as if he had just lost the love of his life.

The soul-sucked human tank trudged back to his seat. However, the others couldn't

stop sneaking glances at participant number 40, whose face was flushed red and head hung low.

With a face stained with shame and embarrassment as if red water would fall from it, number 40 bit his lips and said nothing.

-Aaahh

Damn it.

I washed my hands at the sink in the bathroom near the waiting room, with the water running.

I couldn't wash my face or relieve myself.

Just being in that place made me feel like I would snap at someone, so I couldn't stay there any longer.

Damn it.

I thought Kono Lint might be in the audience, but why on earth is he participating? And in that state?

I almost had a heart attack, worried that Liana, who did my makeup, would recognize me.

When I first arrived, the organizers questioned if I was really the one who signed up to participate, and if I wasn't someone else. I broke out in a cold sweat trying to explain.

Fortunately, my makeup and disguise were so perfect that nobody recognized me, and some even said I looked like an entirely different person.

So Kono Lint didn't recognize me, and even that human tank guy I faced in the tournament didn't recognize me. In fact, he even seemed to be trying to be nice to me.

But seriously, what the hell?

Do I look so stupid that I would mistakenly submit my Miss Temple application to the cross-dressing contest?

-Aaahh

"Whew…”

Really.

I feel like I'm losing my mind.

I need to stay focused.

If I lose my cool, Kono Lint might recognize me.

Only Reinhardt could pull off that kind of expression, right?

Wait a minute.

A crazy twist like that might actually happen.

I need to smile.

I must maintain my composure and ensure no one recognizes me until the end.

"Uh, uh… S-sorry…!"

"…?"

"Huh? Is this the men's restroom…? Ah."

Even the competition staff mistook me for a woman.

Damn it.

It's a problem when things go too well.

Too much of anything is bad.

I must have gone overboard this time.

And my participant number is 40.

They said it was random, but there are only 40 contestants.

I'm sure they deliberately assigned me number 40. I'm certain of it.

The long-awaited, if not grand, cross-dressing contest, which belonged to their own league, had begun.

-Well then, let's begin the 8th annual Temple Cross-Dressing Contest, hosted by the Temple Student Council!

A cross-dressing contest held every year for eight years.

Although there was no overwhelming cheering like during the tournament, the auditorium, rented from an ordinary class, was packed.

There were ordinary people who came out of curiosity for such a bizarre competition, and many students who came to witness their friend's lifelong embarrassing moment as a punishment.

Even though there wasn't a thunderous cheer, the audience was filled with people who were ready to laugh and watched with excited expressions.

Among them was a group from the Erazon class who came to witness Richard Haulman's embarrassing moment.

Also, there were Royal class students Liana de Grantz, Heinrich von Schwartz, Erich de Lafaeri, and Cayer Voiden, who came to watch the cross-dressing competition.

The four Royal class students were there to witness Kono Lint's embarrassing moment.

Heinrich looked at Liana, who was sitting next to him, and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Um, in what sense?"

Everyone joined forces when the guy who said it wouldn't matter if it weren't just him fell into his own trap. They were all looking forward to seeing what bizarre appearance Kono Lint would show.

Erich asked Liana, "What number is he?"

At that question, Liana grinned and looked at Erich, "Number 1."

"Ugh."

"Heh."

They couldn't help but giggle at the fact that he was the first up in this hellish competition. Imagining what Kono Lint's expression was like at the moment was enough to make them happy.

"Alright! We have many fierce contestants this time! Introducing the first participant in the long-awaited cross-dressing competition! Let's introduce him right now!"

The host was filled with excitement for this strange competition.

"First-year Royal class! Introducing Kono Lint! Please welcome him with thunderous applause!"

Although it wasn't thunderous, the mention of the Royal class triggered a grand round of applause.

"Woah! Aaaak! Kiiyaaaak!"

For some reason, Liana de Granz was even more excited than when watching a tournament, screaming and clapping wildly.

It was hard to believe that she was a noble lady, but even those who were not very close to her knew that she was a person who had little to do with such things.

The three no-good siblings, now joined by one more, were taken aback as they watched Liana.

They were the same, but to be so intensely excited about someone else's misfortune.

'Demonic… '

While everyone was thinking that, the first participant with a red face, Kono Lint, was stepping onto the stage.

Liana's makeup was perfect.

Her costume selection was perfect.

The wig selection wasn't bad either.

"Pfft!"

"Ugh!"

"What the heck is that?!"

However, there were quite a few flaws in the clothes hanger.

All four of them here seemed to understand why, despite the strange title, the cross-dressing competition had been held annually for eight years.

They didn't know about anything else, but it was funny, at least.

"Lint, you're a Royal class student, right?"

"Yes."

"You're really cute. You can be confident."

"…”

At the host's words, Kono Lint glared at him as if to say, "Don't mess with me."

"Oh, I misunderstood. It wasn't Lint who was cute, but the outfit."

"Ah."

The host's words soured Lint's expression, and the audience burst into laughter. After all, the cross-dressing contest was just that kind of event. Participants who had

to join due to some embarrassing situation, and the host who gently prodded them, were the main points of interest.

"Did you do your own makeup?"

“…No. A friend did it…”

"A friend? Surely someone who's here watching, right? Their skills are impressive. Who is it? Can they raise their hand?"

At that, Liana, who had been watching from the audience, quickly raised her hand. Even with the attention on her, she showed no signs of embarrassment.

The host looked back and forth between Lint and Liana.

"Oh, it's a lady. Is she your girlfriend?"

"Absolutely not!"

Liana's extremely repulsed expression elicited laughter from the audience once again.

The hopeless trio looked at Liana as if she were a monster.

She was a master at openly mocking people.

"Lint, are you hurt by her strong denial?"

"No! Why would I be hurt?!"

The more Lint adamantly denied it, the more he seemed to be hurt.

"Why did a Royal Class join the cross-dressing contest?"

"Isn't it the same as the others? Like a punishment or something."

"They're just like us, aren't they? I don't think so…”

While the devilish Royal Class students were busy laughing, the audience's reaction was a bit different.

First of all, Lint had the Royal Class premium attached to him.

In a school with nearly one hundred thousand students, there are only about one hundred Royal Class students. Naturally, being a Royal Class comes with a certain level of prestige.

Most common-class students see the Royal Class as an elite group and arrogant bunch.

But there in front of them, wearing an absurd cross-dress and looking lost, was a Royal Class student?

For some reason, the once-distant Royal Class now seemed approachable.

With the Royal Class premium attached,

"Isn't he cute?"

"Yeah, yeah."

The female students' reactions were particularly different.

While Lint wasn't considered handsome, he was just cute enough to earn some compliments.

Add to that Liana de Grantz's makeup skills, and he looked cute enough to warrant some positive comments. Of course, the male students wouldn't agree, but among the female students, there were many who found the shy and awkward Lint adorable.

"Cute!"

"Brother, you're so cute!"

The middle school girls waved their hands and squealed, and Lint, not knowing what was happening, had eyes that were ready to pop out.

After a series of various questions, the host moved on to an important one.

"Anyway, it says here that Kono Lint is a Supernatural."

"Oh…"

Supernatural powers.

People know that such things exist, but very few have seen them in person. After all, even in the academy, it's mainly the Royal Class students and Supernaturals who possess these powers.

No matter how real Supernatural powers are, they are still a foreign concept to most people. That's why the expectation for the Royal Class student who appeared in a ridiculous cross-dress is amplified when they hear he's a Supernatural.

It's no coincidence that Lint was placed first and Reinhardt 40th, falsely claiming it was a random order.

Upon hearing the word "Supernatural," not only Lint but also the other Royal Class male students' expressions stiffened.

"It seems like you haven't decided what to do for the appeal time, so why don't you show us your Supernatural power? Teleportation, that's amazing!"

"!"

"Wow!"

Everyone who knows him knows this.

Kono Lint's Supernatural power is not something that can be shown to the public.

Of course, the penalty has been somewhat offset by now…

But still, he can only teleport in his underwear.

"No, I can't! I absolutely can't!"

Lint's desperate cry rang out.

The male students were left speechless by the crisis that could potentially double Lint's dark history.

Even Liana seemed to think this was too much and was left with her mouth agape. If she had lost her mind even a little, she might have yelled for him to show it. However, Liana was still maintaining her reason.

But.

There were people here who didn't know the details.

"Show us!"

Starting with someone's shout.

"Show us! Show us!"

Everyone shared the same desire to see the Supernatural's demonstration of his power.

"What… what should we do?"

Liana mumbled blankly as she looked at Heinrich.

"I don't know…"

No matter how much Lint had fallen into his own trap.

This time, it was a truly desperate crisis.



PDF by: traitorAIZEN